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Before You Read...

Hey, everyone!

So, this is the third book of my Warrior Cats fanfiction series. If you haven't read the first two books of my series, I suggest that you read those before this one!

Out of the four books I have written so far, this one might be my favorite (shhh!). I hope that you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it!

~ @warriorcatlover345

Allegiances

ThunderClan

Leader Firestar-ginger tom with a flame-colored pelt

Deputy Brambleclaw-dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Medicine cat Jayfeather-gray tabby tom

Apprentice, Snowflight

Warriors (toms and she-cats without kits)

Graystripe-long-haired gray tom

Dustpelt-dark brown tabby tom

Sandstorm-pale ginger she-cat with green eyes

Brackenfur-golden brown tabby tom

Sorreltail-tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat with amber eyes

Cloudtail-long-haired white tom with blue eyes

Brightheart-white she-cat with ginger patches

Thornclaw-golden brown tabby tom

Apprentice, Brairpaw

Lilypetal-brown tabby-and-white she-cat with hazel eyes

Goldenshine-golden brown tabby she-cat with gray eyes

Squirrelflight-dark ginger she-cat with green eyes

Leafpool-light brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes, former medicine cat

Spiderleg-long-limbed black tom with brown underbelly and amber eyes

Mistpelt-white she-cat with dark-gray ears and paws with pale blue eyes

Birchfall-light brown tabby tom

Berrynose-cream-colored tom

Hazeltail-small gray-and-white she-cat

Apprentice, Blossompaw

Mousewhisker- gray-and-white tom

Apprentice, Bumblepaw

Cinderheart-gray tabby she-cat

Lionblaze-golden tabby tom

Foxleap- reddish tabby tom

Icecloud-white she-cat

Toadstep-black-and-white tom

Rosepetal-dark cream she-cat

Millie-stripped gray tabby she-cat

Apprentices (more than six moons old, in training to become warriors)

Snowflight- pure white she-cat with ice-blue eyes, apprentice medicine cat

Brairpaw-dark brown she-cat

Blossompaw-tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat

Bumblepaw-very pale gray tom with black stripes

Queens (she-cats expecting or nursing kits)

Ferncloud-pale gray(with darker flecks) she-cat with green eyes

Daisy-cream long-furred cat from the horseplace

Whitewing-white she-cat with green eyes, mother of Birchfall's kits: Dovekit(gray she-cat) and Ivykit(white tabby she-cat)

Poppyfrost-tortoiseshell she-cat, expecting Berrynose's kits

Elders (former warriors and queens, now retired)

Longtail-pale tabby tom with dark black stripes, retired early due to failing sight

Mousefur-small dusky brown she-cat

Purdy-plump tabby former loner with a gray muzzle

ShadowClan

Leader Blackstar-large white tom with huge jet black paws

Deputy Russetfur-dark ginger she-cat

Medicine Cat Littlecloud-very small tabby tom

Apprentice, Flametail(ginger tom)

Warriors

Oakfur-small brown tom

Apprentice, Ferretpaw(cream-and-gray tom)

Rowanclaw-ginger tom

Smokefoot-black tom

Toadfoot-dark brown tom

Applefur- mottled brown she-cat

Crowfrost-black-and-white tom

Ratscar-brown tom with a long scar across his back

Apprentice, Pinepaw(black she-cat)

Snowbird- pure-white she-cat

Tawnypelt-tortioseshell she-cat with green eyes

Apprentice, Starlingpaw(ginger tom)

Olivenose-tortoiseshell she-cat

Owlclaw-light brown tabby tom

Shrewfoot-gray she-cat with black feet

Scorchfur-dark gray tom

Redwillow-mottled brown-and-ginger tom

Tigerheart-dark brown tabby tom

Dawnpelt-cream-furred she-cat

Queens

Kinkfur-tabby she-cat with long fur that sticks out at all angles

Ivytail-black, white, and tortoiseshell she-cat

Elders

Cedarheart-dark gray tom

Tallpoppy-long-legged light brown tabby she-cat

Snaketail-dark brown tom with tabby-striped tail

Whitewater-white she-cat with long fur, blind in one eye

WindClan

Leader Onestar- brown tabby tom

Deputy Ashfoot-gray she-cat

Medicine Cat Kestrelflight-mottled gray tom

Warriors

Crowfeather-dark gray tom

Owlwhisker-light brown tabby tom

Apprentice, Whiskerpaw(light brown tom)

Whitetail-small white she-cat

Nightcloud-black she-cat

Gorsetail-very pale gray-and-white she-cat with blue eyes

Weaselfur-ginger tom with white paws

Harespring-brown-and-white tom

Leaftail-dark tabby tom with amber eyes

Antpelt-brown tom with one black ear

Emberfoot-gray tom with two dark paws

Heathertail-light brown tabby she-cat with blue eyes

Apprentice, Furzepaw(gray-and-white she-cat)

Breezepelt-black tom with amber eyes

Apprentice, Boulderpaw(large pale gray tom)

Sedgewhisker-light brown tabby she-cat

Swallowtail-dark gray she-cat

Sunstrike-tortoiseshell she-cat with large white mark on her

forehead

Elders

Webfoot- dark gray tabby tom

Tornear- tabby tom

RiverClan

Leader Leopardstar-unusually spotted golden tabby she-cat

Deputy Mistyfoot-gray she-cat with blue eyes

Medicine Cat Mothwing-dappled golden she-cat

Apprentice, Willowshine(gray tabby she-cat)

Warriors

Reedwhisker-black tom

Apprentice, Hollowpaw(dark brown tabby tom)

Rippletail-dark gray tabby tom

Graymist-pale gray tabby she-cat

Apprentice, Troutpaw(pale gray tabby she-cat)

Mintfur-light gray tabby tom

Icewing-white she-cat with blue eyes

Minnowtail-dark gray she-cat

Apprentice, Mossypaw(brown-and-white she-cat)

Pebblefoot-mottled gray tom

Apprentice, Rushpaw(light brown tabby tom)

Mallownose-light brown tabby tom

Robinwing-tortoiseshell-and-white tom

Beetlewhisker-brown-and-white tabby tom

Petalfur-gray-and-white she-cat

Grasspelt-light brown tom

Queens

Duskfur-brown tabby she-cat

Mosspelt-tortoiseshell she-cat with blue eyes

Elders

Blackclaw-smoky black tom

Voletooth-small brown tabby tom

Dawnflower-pale gray she-cat

Dapplenose-mottled gray she-cat

Pouncetail-ginger-and-white tom

Cats Outside Clans

Smoky-muscular gray-and-white tom who lives in a barn at the horseplace

Floss-small gray-and-white she-cat who lives at the horseplace

Ashfur-pale gray(with darker flecks) tom with dark blue eyes

Other Animals

Midnight-a star-gazing badger who lives by the sea

Prologue

[image]

The half-moon shone in the sky as seven cats walked together through the forest. In the back of the group, a white she-cat shivered and squealed with excitement as they traveled.

"Snowpaw," a gray tabby tom hissed, turning back to face the white she-cat, "Calm down, or you'll scare every piece of prey in this forest!" He looked down and shook his head as he spoke.

"I'm sorry, Jayfeather. I'm just so excited! After all, I've only come to the Moonpool two times!" Snowpaw meowed happily. "It's so great being a medicine cat apprentice!" Jayfeather suppressed a purr of amusement as Snowpaw started to run around the area, hopping up and down.

Jayfeather then recalled that originally, Snowpaw had trained as a warrior apprentice along with her sister, Goldenshine. But, almost immediately after she had begun her apprentice, she had taken an interest in herbs and the ways of healing, popping into the medicine den and helping out wherever she could. Jayfeather had barely been able to stand it for the first couple of moons, but eventually got used to the curious she-cat's company. He wasn't surprised at all when Firestar had approached him with Snowpaw, asking if she could train as his apprentice after Leafpool stepped down.

As much as he would hate to show it, he truly was very proud of his apprentice of six moons now. She knew all the herbs that she could possibly learn about. *Which didn't take her long at all*, Jayfeather remembered. She was also very attentive and a great listener, showing so much passion for what she was learning. Jayfeather couldn't ask for much more.

"She sure has come a long way," a pretty golden she-cat meowed, almost repeating Jayfeather's thoughts. "When is she getting her medicine cat name?"

"I'm thinking tonight, Mothwing," Jayfeather answered.

Mothwing nodded and smiled as a gray tabby she-cat hopped in front of her. "Really?" she asked excitedly. "I'm so excited for Snowpaw! It felt so exhilarating getting my medicine cat name."

"Quiet, Willowshine!" a small tabby tom hissed, nodding his head over to Snowpaw, who was still hopping around the group, luckily unaware of their conversation.

"Oh, sorry, Littlecloud," Willowshine said more softly, slapping her tail over her mouth.

Jayfeather heard a *mrrow* of amusement next to him. "Wow, and I thought she was *quiet!*" a ginger tom joked, flicking his tail to Snowpaw. "The Moonpool brings out a different side of her, doesn't it?"

"Oh, be quiet, Flametail!" Willowshine meowed, nudging him on the shoulder. "We need eager apprentices like her!"

Jayfeather had let out a small hiss at Flametail's comment. It was true, Snowpaw had been fairly quiet and shy with him at first, speaking full sentences scarcely and hesitating with every move she made. But it had not taken her long at all to open up to Jayfeather and reveal the eager and bright personality that she had. Jayfeather usually couldn't stand cats like that, but Snowpaw's mix of quiet eagerness but undeniable kindness and spirit was actually quite easy for him to tolerate.

As the half-moon rose higher in the sky, and more stars appeared up in Silverpelt, the cats walked on, with Snowpaw still following in the back. It wasn't before long that the cats arrived at the Moonpool, and Jayfeather could feel StarClan's presence instantly. He shivered with excitement as he sensed Snowpaw padding over to the Moonpool.

This is it! Jayfeather thought. He walked over to where he knew Snowpaw was standing and turned to face her. He could sense her intense nervousness and excitement.

"Before we begin sharing tongues with StarClan," Jayfeather meowed, "I believe that it is about time that my apprentice, Snowpaw, received her full medicine cat name." As he said this, Jayfeather suddenly felt a wave of happiness come from Snowpaw, and he could hear her gasp.

"Really?" Snowpaw breathed, kneading her paws into the ground quickly in enthusiasm.

"Yes, really," Jayfeather answered, flicking Snowpaw's ear with his tail. "You have worked very hard these past six moons. You are ready."

Jayfeather then felt Snowpaw become more focused and attentive, straightening herself up, as he started the ceremony. "I, Jayfeather, medicine cat of ThunderClan, call upon my ancestors to look down on this apprentice. She has trained very hard to understand the ways of a medicine cat, and with your help, she will serve her Clan for many moons."

Even though Jayfeather had no sight, he could tell that Snowpaw's gaze was directly on him. "Snowpaw, do you promise to uphold the ways of a medicine cat, to stand apart from rivalry between Clan and Clan, and to protect all cats equally, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do," Snowpaw responded, her voice shaking. She sounded very nervous, but there was no hesitation or uncertainty there.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your true medicine cat name!" Jayfeather meowed clearly. "Snowpaw, from this moment on, you will be known as Snowflight! StarClan honors you for your incredible skills and your eagerness for knowledge!"

"Snowflight! Snowflight!" The other cats around the Moonpool shouted. Jayfeather padded up to Snowflight and touched his nose to her head.

"Snowflight... I love it!" Snowflight whispered, her tail twitching as Jayfeather pulled away. "Thank you, Jayfeather. And thank you for letting me become your apprentice. I could not be more thankful."

"You deserve it," Jayfeather murmured, touching his nose to his former apprentice's, who would now work beside him as a full medicine cat. He certainly wasn't one for huge sentimental moments, but he was genuinely proud of Snowflight and all she had done to get to this point. *I can be at least a little vulnerable right now, I suppose,* Jayfeather realized.

Then every cat padded up to the Moonpool, licked up some of the ice-cold water, and fell asleep. Jayfeather closed his eyes, and instantly he was standing in the middle of ThunderClan's territory. As he scanned around, now being able to see, he immediately noticed a mysterious gray shape moving up ahead. Jayfeather tried to make out who it was, narrowing his blue eyes, but before that was even possible, his dream suddenly flashed to the ThunderClan medicine den, where he saw Snowflight working.

Jayfeather stared in awe and shock, for he had never actually seen Snowflight before. There was no way he had been *able* to, being blind. Jayfeather observed that her fur was pure white with beautiful ice blue eyes, and a long, furry tail. She was intently organizing herbs and putting them in stacks.

Just like she always does, Jayfeather thought fondly.

Then, out of nowhere, a rustle from a bush came from behind the den. Snowflight lifted her head from her work and dropped her herbs, her eyes widening. Just as a familiar scent began to flood through Jayfeather's nose, the dream flashed away again, and he suddenly saw Ashfur, creeping out from the darkness.

Oh, no! What does that mouse-brain think he's doing? Jayfeather wondered in panic. Before he could leap on Ashfur and stop him from whatever he was about to do, the dream flashed one last time, and Jayfeather saw several cats fighting in the ThunderClan forest, ripping each other apart and seemingly trying to *kill* each other.

As Jayfeather was watching in complete and utter terror, suddenly his eyes shot open, and he was blind again. He could hear the other medicine cats beginning to stir and stand up, and Snowflight waking up beside him.

"That was... amazing!" she meowed joyfully. "My dreams seem to become more cryptic and mysterious each time..." Jayfeather then heard her run quickly away from the Moonpool with the others following closely behind her, purring.

After processing what he had just seen for a few heartbeats, Jayfeather finally stood up and began to follow the others. *Are Snowflight and the Clans in great danger?* Jayfeather asked himself fearfully. *Great StarClan, I'm already dealing with enough!*

Chapter 1

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

As soon as I opened my eyes, I saw bright post-dawn sunlight burst into the warriorsden. It wasn't exactly something I could've overlooked.

I screwed my eyes against the strong light, then blinking a couple of times. I then took a huge stretch before fully standing up. I let out a satisfied huff as I realized that I felt very well-rested, and was ready to take on the new day. Before leaving the den, I curiously turned around and noticed that only a few more cats were still sleeping.

I stretched one last time and then walked out of the den. *I definitely have missed the chance to join the dawn patrol,* I thought disappointedly, *but I'll be ready for any other patrol Firestar or Brambleclaw needs to put me on!* I then realized how guilty I felt for sleeping in so late. *No way am I letting myself return to my old kittypet ways!* I insisted to myself. *One of the most* thrilling *things I got to do then was sleep!*

I then let out a hiss as I thought about my old kittypet life, that I was *so* glad was moons behind me. It had now been about two seasons since I had joined ThunderClan, after being a kittypet for most of my life.

What was absolutely mind-blowing was the fact that now, I had two daughters here that were fully grown - Snowflight now being a full medicine cat alongside Jayfeather, and Goldenshine being a warrior for six moons now, both so dedicated to the paths they had chosen. My heart welled up with pride even at the sounds of their names. Thornclaw, my mate, and I couldn't have been more proud of our kits even if we tried to be.

I have to admit, even now I'm a bit jealous that Goldenshine and Snowflight got to grow up in a Clan, I thought joking as I crawled out

of the warriors den. *But thank StarClan that my curiosity of wild cats got the best of me!*

I stepped out into the camp clearing to see that dawn patrol was returning - with Thornclaw, Goldenshine, along with Brightheart and Hollyleaf. I let out a breath of relief as my gaze fell on the fluffy black she-cat thankful to StarClan that she had managed to find her place back in ThunderClan after the crazy events of one of the full-moon Gatherings. She had revealed to all four Clans that Squirrelflight and Brambleclaw weren't her parents, along with Jayfeather and Lionblaze. Wanting to escape it all, she had then run into one of the old tunnels in ThunderClan territory, Goldenshine heroically but *stupidly* leaping in after her as the tunnel collapsed above her

I had then led a rescue patrol to save the two she-cats, refusing to believe that Goldenshine and Hollyleaf were dead. And, with a smart idea created by Snowflight, Snowpaw at the time, we had found the both of them alive and well, able to return to the Clans.

At first, ThunderClan cats were reluctant to speak with Hollyleaf because of how she had chosen to handle herself that night, but slowly, her Clanmates began to warm up to her again. Of course, things were still incredibly tense with her, Jayfeather, Lionblaze, Squirrelflight and Leafpool, and the wound certainly wasn't healed yet, but a good poultice was being applied each day.

Pulling myself out of my own world, I then watched as the dawn patrol immediately walked over to Firestar, the ThunderClan leader, to report. Firestar watched them approach, his gaze serious and his green eyes glowing with anticipation.

"No sign of anything wrong, Firestar," Thornclaw meowed proudly, dipping his head to the flame-colored tom as he padded up to stand in front of him.

Firestar nodded, sighing with relief. "Good. No other Clan scents at all?"

Thornclaw simply shook his head.

Firestar nodded back again before padding over to the fresh-kill pile to join his mate, Sandstorm and his old friend, Graystripe. My eyes still being on the ThunderClan leader and his closest friends, I didn't notice Thornclaw approaching me for a few heartbeats. I felt a purr rumbling in my throat as he then proceeded to settle down beside me and gently licked my head.

"How are you this morning?" He asked me gently, pulling away from my head to look at me with his tender pale blue eyes.

My stomach filled up with butterflies as I got lost in my mate's gaze. *Even though it doesn't seem possible, I thought, I manage to fall more and more in love with this cat each day...*

Thornclaw was the last cat that I had met when I arrived in ThunderClan those couple of seasons ago, and I had begun to fall for him the more that we spent time together - sharing prey and even going on our own little hunting trips. We had become mates just a couple of moons before I was officially a warrior. He was all that I could ask for - kind, thoughtful, warm, brave... need I go on. I knew that he would always be by my side through anything, and I loved him for that. *Well, I love him for a lot of reasons, but that reason is pretty great!*

Now that Goldenshine and Snowflight were all grown up, I almost felt as if Thornclaw and I were as we were when we had first become mates - so excited for our future together, padding side by side in all of our adventures, and there had definitely been a lot of them! Thornclaw had been the cat with me when I found my long lost mother, Mistpelt, wandering through ThunderClan territory, and the two of us had traveled through the forest to chase away Ashfur, a ThunderClan exile, who had now not made any appearances since I had chased him out *moons* ago. *After all of the trouble that he caused - threatening Squirrelflight and trying to hurt those in her family, it is definitely for the best.*

I finally touched my nose with Thornclaw's in greeting as I purred. "I am great, my love," I answered. "How are you?"

"I'm wonderful, now that I'm out of that dawn patrol and here with you," Thornclaw meowed, his pale blue gaze warm. I continued to

purr as I dug my head into his fur, and Thornclaw twinned his tail with mine.

I sighed, drinking in Thornclaw's scent, then nearly flinching as I suddenly heard a voice meow disgustingly, "Great StarClan, you two are gross!"

I looked up to see my daughter, Goldenshine, standing just a tail-length in front of Thornclaw and I. She looked as if she had just found maggots in her fresh-kill.

I padded up to lick Goldenshine's ear, purring with amusement. "I am so sorry. Your parents liking each other? How dreadful!" I teased, nudging Goldenshine on the shoulder. "I wouldn't speak too soon, anyway! I'm sure you are going to fall in love someday, and then I'll stare disgustingly at the two of *you!*"

Goldenshine simply snorted and then meowed, still looking repulsed, "I don't think I will. I'm *never* getting a mate!"

I stared at my daughter, my eyes wide. I quickly glanced back to exchange a look with Thornclaw, whose eyes still shone with humor as he shook his head slowly.

I suppose finding a mate has never been a priority of Goldenshine's up until now. "Why not?" I asked Goldenshine after she stated her supposed commitment, turning back to her.

"What do you mean, why not?" Goldenshine meowed without hesitation. "It's a waste of time! A mate would only distract me from my duties." As I let out a small *mrrow* of laughter, Goldenshine then looked as if a new idea had just popped into her mind.

"Oh! And by the way, Brambleclaw told me a little while ago that he wanted you for a water patrol. I almost forgot!"

"What!?" I squealed with panic before scurrying across camp without another word. *How could Goldenshine forget to tell me something like that?* I wondered annoyingly. I could hear Thornclaw purring with amusement behind me.

I started to look for Brambleclaw, the ThunderClan deputy. *What a*

great way to start off the day, being late for patrol!

I finally found him underneath the Highledge, organizing patrols as he usually did, and I quickly ran up to the dark tabby tom, panting as I skidded to a quick halt. "Brambleclaw, am I late?"

Brambleclaw shook his head. "Not at all, Lilypetal, don't worry," he assured me. "You're joining my water patrol with Lionblaze, Dovepaw, Cinderheart, and Ivypaw."

I nodded eagerly. "Absolutely," I meowed. Although I would try to show enthusiasm on every patrol I went on, I couldn't help but let my tail droop as I had spoken, my mind going back to the idea that we even *had* to go on these water patrols in the first place.

It had now been about seven moons since the Clans had first realized that the lake and the streams were nearly *gone*, as if the water had been drained away. Currently, we barely had any water left to quench our thirst. The Clans had to go to the *very* small lake with moss and collect some water for those who really needed it in our Clans, and they were being referred to as the *water patrols*. Simple, but it described the job being done.

Trying to push negative images of dehydrated cats away, I followed Brambleclaw as he led our patrol out of camp. Almost as soon as we left, I noticed that we were traveling fairly slowly, definitely not in a hurry to fulfill what we were supposed to.

It's always a little scary to pad out of the forest to see the lake in its state now, I realized. *It shocks me every time!*

As I always did when I arrived to the lake to collect water, I let out a gasp as my hazel gaze fell onto the lake. Well... *puddle*, rather, but I wasn't going to try and see it that way. But truthfully, there might as well have never been a lake there at all.

I was so caught up in my fear and surprise, that when my paws suddenly sunk into the sodden earth, I let out a startled hiss. I bared my teeth as my paws suddenly stepped into wet mud. *Great StarClan, gross!*

"How do ShadowClan do this?" I couldn't help but ask, I suppose trying to cope with the uncomfortable situation.

I saw Brambleclaw shrug about a foxlength in front of me. "It's just what they're made to do, I suppose," he answered. "The other Clans must wonder how we can stand to live under so many trees!"

I snorted. "That's true!" I meowed. "But personally, living under trees sound pretty ideal to me!"

We then walked in silence as we began to trudge through the mud, until finally arriving to the small portion of what was left of the lake. I took my moss that was in my mouth and slowly dipped it into the water. Droplets fell back down into the puddle as the moss collected the liquid.

As soon as Brambleclaw made sure that everyone had some water-filled moss to bring back, he began to lead us back to camp. I purred with amusement as I watched Ivypaw sniff at a dead fish as we walked back. *Anything to distract from this drought, I suppose!*

Suddenly, our patrol stopped as we heard a voice yowl from a little ways away. A different Clan scent began to flood through my nostrils.

"What are you doing here?"

Chapter 2

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

I narrowed my eyes, growing wary as a mottled gray tom stomped towards our patrol, his eyes blazing with anger. I didn't even have to get a good look at him, for I knew almost immediately that he was from RiverClan, given his watery and damp-like scent.

I'm sure that it's RiverClan taking this drought the hardest, I realized as I watched the tom quickly approach us. *I mean, their whole Clan revolves around the concept of water...*

"This is our water!" The tom suddenly growled, almost supporting my thoughts. He then shot his gaze back to Ivypaw, whose eyes were wide with surprise and confusion. "And *that* is a RiverClan fish!" He insisted, baring his teeth and lashing his tail towards the fish that Ivypaw had sniffed at just heartbeats ago.

All she did was sniff it! What's the big deal? I realized to myself, shaking my head slowly. *Other Clans, sometimes. I swear...*

"What-" Ivypaw stammered as the RiverClan tom began to stomp towards her, but she then gasped shakily as the tom suddenly slipped and fell into a large puddle of mud. My heart nearly stopped as I realized that he was slowly starting to sink down into the ground, helpless to get himself out.

"Help!" he shouted, trying to sink his claws into the dirt to keep him from sinking in deeper and already spitting chunks of dirt and water from his mouth.

"Rainstorm!" Brambleclaw yowled, his eyes widening with alarm. He then leaped over to stand beside the sinking tom before whipping his head around to look back at our patrol. "Lionblaze, grab me a stick! *Now!*" He barked at the young warrior.

Lionblaze nodded urgently, scanning his gaze around the area before quickly finding and grabbing a very flat-looking stick. I almost wanted to grab it from the tabby tom and look at it as I noticed that it had some strange markings all over it. But I pushed my curiosity away, knowing that I might as *well* choose for this stubborn RiverClan tom to live over getting to look at a cool stick.

Lionblaze was just about to give Rainstorm one end of the stick when Jayfeather suddenly appeared out of nowhere from behind some bushes, over by the forest.

"Don't use that stick!" he hissed. Snowflight was trailing behind him, her face clearly overcome with shock at what was happening, but I had to suppress a purr of amusement as she briefly glanced over at her former mentor, her pale blue eyes flashing with concern and confusion at his behavior.

Wow, I guess I'm not the only one emotionally attached to this stick, I realized jokingly as I saw the look of fear of Jayfeather's face.

"*What?!* Why not?" Lionblaze asked, seemingly growing angry and more anxious as Rainstorm sank lower and lower into the mud.

Jayfeather hesitated for a few heartbeats before finally answering. "Just... just *please* don't use it!" He demanded, unsheathing his claws and sinking them into the earth, and glaring back at his brother impatiently.

Lionblaze was clearly concerned about Jayfeather's fuss over the stick, but he knew that he didn't have time to deal with it.

"Fine then!" Lionblaze growled before throwing Jayfeather's stick aside and quickly grabbing another. He then gave it to Brambleclaw, who gave one end to Rainstorm to grab onto. My stomach twisted nervously as it looked like for just a heartbeat that Rainstorm was too low into the mud to reach. But conveniently, after a small prayer to StarClan, Rainstorm managed to bite the other end of the stick, and Brambleclaw pulled Rainstorm out of the mud with almost no struggle at all.

Rainstorm let out a loud grunt as he finally made it to higher

ground. "Thanks," the tom meowed roughly, shaking out his fur as mud splattered everywhere. I hissed as I almost had to duck down. *I definitely am not turning into a brown tabby-and-white she-cat with* extra *brown splotches today!*

I immediately pushed away my annoyance, padding up to the RiverClan tom worriedly. I mean, he had just nearly drowned! I wasn't going to let Clan rivalry get in the way of showing compassion.

"Great StarClan! Are you okay?" I asked Rainstorm, putting the tip of my tail on his shoulder for support. "That was a nasty fall!"

I nearly flinched back as the tom let out an angry hiss. "I'm fine!" Rainstorm growled, jerking himself away from me. I tried not to show my annoyance at how rude he was being, despite after what we had just done for him. *Our ThunderClan deputy just saved your life, mouse-brain!* I told the tom in my head, but not daring say it out loud.

"Let's take you to our medicine cat," Brambleclaw offered, looking at Rainstorm up and down, who was now covered from head to paws in mud even after shaking out his fur.

Rainstorm then looked as if one of us had physically swiped one of our claws across his face. "I don't need help from another Clan!" The gray tom insisted, barring his teeth with aggression once again.

I then watched as Cinderheart padded up to stand in front of the stubborn tom. "Actually, I think you should come," Cinderheart commented, looking at Rainstorm up and down as Brambleclaw had done. "You must rest until your are strong enough to travel back to RiverClan... which certainly isn't now!"

Rainstorm hesitated greatly before muttering something I couldn't make out. But to my relief, and I'm sure everyone else's too, he then *finally* nodded begrudgingly without another word.

Thank StarClan! I thought as I watched Rainstorm shake out his fur again. *As hard as it is, sometimes you have to let your guard down for your health, buddy!*

"Okay, then. Let's go," Brambleclaw murmured, interrupting my thoughts as he let Rainstorm lean on his broad shoulder.

Once our patrol had collected our water-filled moss, having dropped them out of the shock of the situation, we then began to travel back to the ThunderClan camp with great urgency.

Chapter 3

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

I was sitting by the fresh-kill pile, eating a squirrel with Mousewhisker and Hazeltail, when the water patrol that I had sent Lilypetal on just a *tad* bit late finally returned, for some reason looking more muddy and battered than they usually did. I watched curiously as Cinderheart and Lionblaze walked over to the elders den and dropped their moss off there, while Ivypaw and Dovepaw traveled over to the nursery. Lilypetal stood next to Brambleclaw, gently placing her moss down as they began to look for Firestar, I assumed.

I then flicked my ears as I noticed the strange warrior that was trailing behind them, his fur just as muddy as the rest of the patrol. He looked extremely annoyed, while simultaneously a little shaken and nervous.

What in the name of StarClan happened on that patrol? And... who is *that?* I wondered, glaring at the extremely muddy tom who clearly wasn't a ThunderClan warrior.

The tom froze as he noticed me glaring back at him. He then quickly broke his gaze and ran to follow the arriving ThunderClan cats.

I stood up and tried to pad closer to the Highledge as subtly as I could to listen as the patrol was walking up to Firestar, who was staring curiously at the newcomer just below the Highledge.

"Who is this?" Firestar asked, looking back at the tom with narrowed eyes. "Even through that mud, I can tell that he's not a ThunderClan warrior."

"Rainstorm of RiverClan," Brambleclaw answered. "He nearly drowned in mud on our patrol, and we figured that we should bring

him here to recover."

My gaze went back to Rainstorm as I heard him snort. "I'm not weak or anything," he demanded, rolling his eyes before letting his muddy head fall to the ground.

Firestar just blinked, clearly trying to decide what he wanted to do with the muddy furball.

"Okay, that is fine" he answered. "But he *must* leave as soon as he recovers. You can take him to Jayfeather and Snowflight right now." Firestar then nodded to Lilypetal and Brambleclaw in farewell before joining Sandstorm at the fresh-kill pile.

Brambleclaw nodded back to his leader and then began to lead Rainstorm towards the medicine den at the other side of the clearing. I followed the dark brown tabby tom with my gaze, and just barely was able to see Snowflight suddenly poke her head out of the entrance and beckon Rainstorm inside, looking quite bewildered and confused. I couldn't help but sigh and roll my eyes as I watched my sister then turn around, her white fluffy tail disappearing back inside.

Although I had tried my incredibly hard to be happy for my sister, who was now a full ThunderClan medicine cat alongside Jayfeather, it was difficult when I knew that she had decided to follow a path completely different that mine. Snowflight had become the medicine cat apprentice as soon as Leafpool had been forbidden from her medicine cat duties, which still upset me a little bit to this day.

Back when I was an apprentice, I had wanted Snowflight to become a warrior with me. I wanted to go on patrols with her, go out hunting, and fight alongside each other in battle. Luckily, we had been able to train beside each other until almost the end of my apprenticeship, but the night I had become a warrior also happened to be the same night that she was deemed the official ThunderClan medicine cat apprentice.

It was still quite difficult to accept, even now, me having been a warrior and her a medicine cat for six moons. But I knew that I

couldn't act like an immature apprentice anymore, and I had to accept what she wanted. I had let Snowflight know that I wasn't angry with her for her decisions. She was my sister, and I loved her, after all.

I really want her to be happy, I thought. *I just need to get over my petty selfishness.*

Pulling myself from my bitter thoughts, I walked over to Lilypetal after seeing the patrol separate. As soon as I fell into her sight, her hazel eyes lit up and she padded over to me happily. A purr rumbled in my throat as I touched my nose to Lilypetal's in greeting. *Unfortunately nowadays, seeing Lilypetal or Thornclaw and getting to talk to them feels like a privilege*, I realized sadly. *Now that we're all warriors, we're all busy with different duties!*

I pushed away negative thoughts once again, deciding to ask my mother about this incident that had caused this water patrol to bring a RiverClan cat into camp. "So, what happened?" I questioned, looking back at the medicine den where Rainstorm had disappeared just moments ago.

I purred with amusement as I watched Lilypetal roll her eyes, knowing quite well that she wasn't one to get frustrated often. "Rainstorm, who came out of nowhere, mind you, caught Ivypaw sniffing a fish," Lilypetal explained, twitching her tail with annoyance. "For *whatever* reason, he had to be difficult, saying that sniffing a fish is intruding on RiverClan's water. So, he tried to run after Ivypaw to stop her, from... *sniffing* the fish, and he fell into a deep mud puddle."

I nodded, continuing to purr. "Well, you did say he was being difficult. Maybe it was what he deserved!" I commented. "Why did you bring him here?" I then asked, tilting my head.

Lilypetal looked back at the medicine den, her eyes suddenly glowing with sympathy. "He took a pretty rough fall!" She responded. "He would have never been able to make it to his camp by himself."

Rainstorm's lucky that ThunderClan's hospitality is as great as it is, I

realized, rolling my eyes.

I nodded again before I felt Lilypetal's muzzle touch the top of my head. "I know it's probably not fun for you to have a strange trespasser in this camp," she meowed softly, knowing very well that I could be very wary of outsiders if I wanted to be. "But I'm sure he'll be out of here before you know it, don't worry."

"Thanks," I whispered to my mother, drinking in her sweet scent like I did as a kit for just a moment. "I hope so!"

Lilypetal then gave me another touch on the nose in farewell, giving me a look full of love, before proceeding to walk over to the fresh-kill pile where Thornclaw was sitting down, waiting for her.

As the two of them scooted closer to each other and began to talk, twinning their tails together and hearing their purrs... I couldn't help but question my words from earlier, when I had committed to swearing off of trying to find a mate someday.

I still considered it a waste of time, *definitely*, but... the thought of feeling those first butterflies, falling in love, having that special companion beside you always, was...

I then shook my head quickly, realizing that those thoughts were completely outrageous. *No way, my initial thoughts were exactly how I feel,* I told myself. *I have my Clan and my warrior duties to focus on, and that's enough!*

I shifted my thoughts over to the fresh-kill pile. It was now dusk, and many cats had already eaten, so the heap was fairly low.

I have nothing else to do for the moment, so I may as well go hunt, I thought. *I'll fill up that pile for the moonhigh snackers!*

Coming to a decision, I trotted over to the camp entrance and out into the forest.

Chapter 4

[image]

Snowflight's POV

I was shocked when I suddenly saw an unfamiliar cat walk into the medicine cat den, his pelt reeking of mud and water. It was so strong that I almost had to wrinkle my nose as the scent overcame me. The tom's head was lowered and his pelt was covered in so much mud that I couldn't identify his fur color at first. Having taken another sniff as he walked deeper into the den, I then realized that it was RiverClan scent that was flooding through my nose.

I stared at the entrance of the medicine cat den as the tom entered, Brambleclaw following him in just heartbeats after.

"This is Rainstorm of RiverClan," Brambleclaw meowed, confirming what I had thought. "He fell in some mud while we were at the lake collecting water, so we took him here to recover before he returns to his territory."

"Stupid mouse-brain," I heard Jayfeather mutter. I tried not to purr with amusement at his comment as Rainstorm walked deeper into the den and sat down in the newly made nest Jayfeather was setting.

Brambleclaw watched Rainstorm, his eyes narrowed before averting his gaze to me. "He's a bit of a stubborn one," he whispered jokingly. "Think you can handle him?"

I tried to suppress a *mrrow* of laughter, lightly flicking my tail over to Jayfeather. "I deal with it often enough with that furball over there," I purred to Brambleclaw, sniffing as I heard Jayfeather snort from behind me. "But in all seriousness, don't worry! We've got him handled."

I lashed my tail in goodbye to Brambleclaw who nodded to me before he left the den. I then walked over to the herb stock where

Jayfeather was beginning to sniff through the different kinds and sorts.

I analyzed Rainstorm's situation. *He's dirty, for one*, I thought, glancing back at the mud-covered tom. *He seems pretty shaken...*

I leaned in closer to Jayfeather. "Do you think he'll need thyme for the shock?" I asked, about to pick up a few thyme leaves. I was pretty sure thyme was what we needed, but I always felt like I needed to confirm, just to be sure. *I seem to be questioning myself* more *after becoming a full medicine cat!* I realized.

"That would probably be best," Jayfeather answered, nodding with approval. "You can give him those and then get some wet moss to clean him off. After he's clean, we can see if he has any wounds that we need to treat."

"Alright!" I meowed, nodding to my former mentor and picking up the thyme. I slowly walked over to the dirty tom and placed the thyme right in front of his muzzle.

"Eat these, please," I urged Rainstorm gently, keeping in mind that Brambleclaw had told me he was stubborn. "They will help you to calm down. I can imagine that what you just went through was pretty stressful!"

Rainstorm simply grunted before almost immediately licking up the herbs, chewing them, and swallowing them all.

"Good!" I praised, giving Rainstorm a slight tap on the shoulder with the tip of my tail. Then, I quickly turned around and left the medicine den to get water, as Jayfeather had told me to do. As soon as I slid through the entrance and out into camp, sunlight beamed all around me, and I felt I could barely keep my eyes open.

Great StarClan, a cat could become as blind as Jayfeather if they stared at my white fur reflecting against the sun!

I almost thought that I would have to walk all the way to the lake with some fresh moss to get water, but to my luck, I saw my mother, Lilypetal, holding some damp moss in her jaws. I quickly

ran over to her, ready to ask her for a favor.

She turned her head to me as I ran up in front of her. "Hi, Snowflight," she meowed kindly through a mouth full of moss. "Need something?"

"Your moss, actually," I purred, pointing my nose to the moss.

"Absolutely!" Lilypetal exclaimed with no hesitation. She quickly placed the moss on the ground for me to grab. I nodded to her in gratitude and picked it up in my jaws.

"Thank you so much!" I whispered to her. A wave of affection then flowed through me as we touched noses, and I took in my mother's familiar scent.

"Hey, want to know something?" Lilypetal meowed after she pulled away.

I tilted my head with intrigue. "What?"

Lilypetal's hazel eyes glowed with admiration. "I'm very proud of you," she purred, touching her muzzle to my cheek. "ThunderClan is in such good paws with you as one of their medicine cats."

I sighed as I was overwhelmed with affection all over again. "Thank you," I purred back through my mouth of moss, licking Lilypetal's shoulder. "I love you, mother."

"And I love you," Lilypetal meowed softly before nodding back to the medicine den. "Now, that moss wasn't just for you, I hope? You had better get back to your den before Jayfeather or Rainstorm throw a fit!"

I let out a *mrrow* of laughter. "No, it wasn't," I meowed, then turning to walk back to the medicine den, my mouth still full with wet moss. "Bye, Lilypetal!"

The hot sun shone on my fur as I trotted along, and I tried my best not to let myself drink the nice, cold and fresh water in my mouth. I bit down hard on the moss and narrowed my eyes, determined as I continued to walk back to the medicine den.

The Clan always comes before you do, I told myself. *I couldn't bring myself to drink this, no matter how badly I would want to! I would feel much too guilty!*

When I finally arrived back inside the den, Jayfeather was hovering over Rainstorm. He looked up at me with his blind eyes as I walked in.

"It's about time," he muttered, slight annoyance appearing in his meow. I lightly tapped the tip of my tail on his shoulder, letting out a snort, and then looked down at Rainstorm.

I froze and looked back at Jayfeather, suddenly lost for what I needed to do next.

Sometimes I hesitated to ask the gray tabby tom for help, now considering that I wasn't really his apprentice anymore. Him being quite snappy and frustrated with every cat around him would be another issue for some, but Jayfeather was usually pretty gentle with me, and had been throughout my medicine cat apprenticeship.

I had always admired Jayfeather, but I had to admit, walking into the medicine den for the first time as a medicine cat apprentice had been a little nerve-wracking, because I knew that Jayfeather had never handled an apprentice before. I was worried that he would show me no mercy - snapping at every little thing I did, and hammering me with questions about herbs whenever he got the chance.

Well, the latter did happen every so often, but overall, Jayfeather had been *very* patient with me and had managed to be a brilliant mentor. I couldn't have learned more from anyone else, I knew that. And the fact that we were a lot closer in age that most apprentices and mentors would likely be maybe made things a little easier for him.

"Pour the moss on him by the pool," Jayfeather commanded, clearly noticing my hesitation. "Just lick off what's left, and then I can do the rest."

I gave Jayfeather a small grunt to show that I had heard him as I

helped Rainstorm to stand up. I then led him over to the small pool of water that we had in the medicine den for us. I took the moss by my paws and squeezed as much as I could on Rainstorm. I was shocked that the gray tom didn't even flinch *once* as I poured the freezing-cold moss on him, but then I realized he was in RiverClan, and he was *used* to water, of course.

After I poured the water on Rainstorm, I started to lick around his flank. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Jayfeather standing close beside me, observing everything I did. Even though he couldn't see, he still seemed to be watching in admiration.

Thank StarClan, I thought with relief. *When Jayfeather approves, all is right in the world!*

When I finished treating Rainstorm, I looked at Jayfeather for approval one last time, my eyes wide with concern as I awaited confirmation.

"Good," he meowed and nodded curtly. The gray tabby tom then picked up a few herbs from our stash and padded over to stand beside me. "I can take it from here," he meowed through a mouth of herbs. "Great job, Snowflight."

I nodded to him, touching my nose to his ear briefly, before walking outside to find the setting sun. I sighed with slight exhaustion, but extreme satisfaction as I watched it start to sink behind the trees.

It's great to be a medicine cat, I thought happily, settling down and lying my head down over my paws.

Chapter 5

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

I sat quietly in the middle of camp as the sun began to set, and the stars of Silverpelt began to emerge up into the sky.

Thornclaw had been chosen to keep watch tonight, so he had left to take a nap after we shared a meal together.

So now, I was alone, and was drifting off into my own thoughts. So I froze, startled, as suddenly a shadow hovered over me, and I looked up to see my mother, Mistpelt, padding up to settle down beside me.

"Beautiful evening, isn't it?" she asked, following my gaze to look up at the sky. Her light blue eyes looked beautiful reflecting against the evening light.

"Yes, definitely," I meowed, looking down and giving my mother a warm look. "There's nothing like newleaf weather. It's absolutely perfect!"

Mistpelt returned the warm look, and then sighed as she looked back up to the pink sky. "I remember back when I lived in ThunderClan, in the old territory," she murmured, seemingly starting to get lost in old memories. "The sunsets there were just as amazing as they are here."

I met her gaze once again with wide eyes, realizing all over again that my mother had had such an adventurous and crazy past. She had lived and been born in the old Clan territories, back at the forest where I had originally been a kittypet. I had been born just before the BloodClan battle, and had only been a kit in ThunderClan for a couple of moons before Mistpelt and I were taken by a fox-hearted Twoleg.

Sure, I knew all of this and more, but I realized that I had never truly inquired my mother about all of the things that were going on in the Clans before I came along!

I began to lash my tail back and forth eagerly. "What was your life like back there?" I asked her, suddenly very eager and curious. "In the old territories?"

Mistpelt purred as I had asked the question. "Well, it was pretty hectic, actually," she answered, sighing with exasperation as she was brought back. "When I first arrived there, it was pretty soon before the BloodClan battle had taken place, so cats didn't really have time to pay attention to me!"

Wait a moment...

My eyes narrowed as I was suddenly filled with suspicion and even more curiosity. Something Mistpelt had said had hit a nerve with me. *Why did she say she* arrived *in the Clans?*

"Wait a moment..." I repeated out loud, narrowing my eyes. "Arrived?"

Mistpelt's eyes suddenly grew into two round blue moons. I knew immediately that she had just realized she said something that she shouldn't have. I tried to suppress a suspicious and irritated hiss as my mother tried to find her words.

After a few heartbeats, she finally did. "Um... well, when I was first born! That's what I meant by *arrived*. I misspoke," she explained, but her gaze was staring at her paws as if she wanted to blow off what had just happened as soon as she could.

I didn't care though, not one bit, so I continued to press. "But you couldn't have been born *just* then!" I realized out loud, trying to recall all that Mistpelt had told me in the past. "You said that you *fought* in the BloodClan battle, and that you remember it so clearly!"

Mistpelt stood up and started to back away, clearly not wanting to deal with this confrontation anymore. "I have to go now," she meowed nervously, then beginning to run to the Clan entrance.

There is no way in StarClan that I'm letting her run away from this conversation! I realized. I began to pelt after my mother, desperate to finish what we had started. I was finding out that after almost two entire seasons that my mother was hiding things from me, and I wasn't going to let her prolong it any more.

"Wait!" I shouted. I caught up to her as she was about to crawl through the tunnel. "Where did you live before you came to ThunderClan? You clearly haven't always *lived* in ThunderClan."

I then narrowed my eyes once again and flicked my ears, pacing back and forth in front of Mistpelt. "Unless you just keep misspeaking, which I'm sure isn't the case..." I muttered, beginning to become very impatient and annoyed that Mistpelt was clearly hiding things from me, and was being as persistent as Thornclaw was whenever we went to sleep for the night in our nest, saying that he was *protecting me* by sleeping on the side closest to the den entrance.

"None of that matters!" Mistpelt nearly shouted. As she had said this, I suddenly could feel the eyes of many ThunderClan cats on the both of us.

"Yes, it *all* does!" I demanded, wanting to whimper out loud with how confused and concerned I felt. "I need to know who my mother *is*!" I insisted, stepping up closer to her, trying to calm down.

Mistpelt then sighed and locked her gaze with mine. My heart felt like it was suddenly beating at triple the speed. I had no idea what I was about to be told. *Watch, I'm going to find out that Mistpelt was a savage murderer or something...* I joked, trying to calm myself down. I took a deep breath, nodded and tried to listen closely. Obviously there was going to be something that Mistpelt was going to say that was going to shock me, considering she had tried to dodge revealing all of this to me in the first place.

"Lilypetal, long before you were born, I lived in the old forest with my mother and father," she began to explain, ignoring the watching cats around us. "We were very happy, but one day the dogs that Tigerstar had sent out killed my parents, so I was on my own." I then put my tail tip on Mistpelt's shoulder as her eyes closed. "I

started to wander through the Twolegplace, and I found a great group of cats to live with for a while, and I seemed to forget about the loss of my parents."

I blinked and took a deep breath. I certainly had had no idea that Mistpelt lived in the Twolegplace, but clearly that wasn't the terrible secret she had been trying to hide from me. "Okay... but what made you come to ThunderClan?" I pressed, getting more and more nervous with every heartbeat that went by.

Mistpelt then looked down at her paws. "It's complicated," she meowed. Then she almost immediately looked up at me again. Her eyes were clouded with emotion and sadness all of the sudden. "One cat there just... didn't respect me, and he did something that wasn't right. He wasn't the cat that I thought he was."

I looked at Mistpelt, trying to hide all of what I was feeling as it all built up. "Where did you and this cat live?"

Mistpelt then looked like she wanted to bolt out of camp. Immediately noticing this, I narrowed my eyes and hardened my tone as I meowed, "And you're going to tell me."

Mistpelt looked back up at me with her clouded eyes, proceeding to run her tail along my flank. "Before I lived in ThunderClan, I lived in BloodClan, with Scourge," she nearly whispered.

My mouth dropped. *BloodClan?!* I repeated to myself. *Great StarClan, Mistpelt sure knows how to bury the lede!*

"BloodClan? Why?" I asked, trying to control my anger once again. I couldn't fathom my mother living with *BloodClan* cats. I had heard several stories of the fierce group of cats that lived in the Twolegplace. Their leader was Scourge. He was very dangerous, and he had ripped all nine of Tigerstar's lives at *once*. All four Clans had nearly had to fight them to the death to get them to leave the forest.

Knowing this made me even more nervous that I could have ever thought possible, and my heart nearly stopped as I realized that Mistpelt was answering my question. "...because that is where I met

your father," Mistpelt murmured, her gaze suddenly seeming even.

She probably realizes that there's no backing out now... I thought.

Then, as Mistpelt had finished speaking, I realized one question that I had never asked her. I almost seemed to lose my breath as I looked over at the nursery where Berrynose was flanking Poppyfrost, whose belly was beginning to swell with new kits. Then I looked over to where Dustpelt was talking to his son, Birchfall, underneath the Highledge.

I took a long, deep breath, and then turned to Mistpelt again.

"Mistpelt, who is my father?" I asked her, the words ringing through the now very silent camp, sharply and clearly.

She answered the question without hesitation.

"Lilypetal, your father *is* Scourge."

Chapter 6

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

"Gotcha!"

I meowed with triumph after giving the killing blow to a small vole I had seemed to chase halfway across the ThunderClan forest. After picking up my new catch, letting out a satisfied grunt, I looked up to see that the sun had finally left for the day, and the stars of Silverpelt, our warrior ancestors, were beginning to spread across the night sky.

Realizing how late it was getting, I quickly trotted over to a nearby bush and started to dig up the fresh-kill I had buried there earlier. I hadn't had much luck, unfortunately, considering the drought was causing prey to go to areas with more water.

I snorted as I thought of this. *Where's that? I'd sure like to go there!*

After I gathered up all of the fresh-kill in my mouth, I quickly trotted back to camp, listening to the coos of owls in the distance, and the cicadas crying out with their usual chirps. Once I arrived back in camp and crawled through the camp entrance, I saw my father, Thornclaw, standing guard for the night. I nodded to him in greeting before putting my prey on the weak fresh-kill pile.

I then turned and walked back to the camp entrance, deciding that I didn't want to go into the warriors den to sleep *just* yet. Thornclaw's gaze followed me as I began to walk out.

"Not tired?" he asked, concern glowing in his pale blue eyes.

I shook my head. "I'm going to see if I can find any more prey," I answered. "I wouldn't even be able to fall asleep, anyway, I've got so much energy!"

"That typically is your reputation," Thornclaw purred teasingly, licking my head. "Don't stay out too long, or I'll be tempted to go out and look for you. Good luck!"

I looked warmly at my father, touching my nose to his briefly before padding past camp entrance and walking out into the forest once again. *I love my father, I really do!* I thought, *but Great StarClan, him having a family certainly made him a worrier rather than a warrior sometimes!*

I quietly purred with amusement at my own joke before gaping my mouth open to taste the air.

I let out an annoyed huff. No prey scent.

If this drought lasts much longer, we won't be prepared for leaf-bare at all, I realized nervously. *StarClan forbid.*

As I walked deeper into the forest, I tried to think of where some prey might still be stirring. *Maybe there's some rabbits around the WindClan border?*

Making this realization, I then trotted quickly over to where WindClan's hills lay. Once I could see and smell their scent markers, I almost instantly smelled the faint scent of a rabbit.

I began to follow the sweet and appetizing scent, trying to keep my mouth from practically watering.

But, I then froze as I suddenly heard a rustle come from some bushes beside me. I flicked my ears and looked up to see that it had come from the other side of the border, to my dismay.

Probably just some prey, I thought, disappointed that the sound hadn't come from the ThunderClan side.

As I tried to sniff out the rabbit I had caught the scent of, I heard a large twig snap in half. I stopped in my tracks and stood wide-eyed.

That step was too heavy to be a piece of prey!

"W-who's there?" I meowed, my voice shaking. Being alone in the

forest at night suddenly didn't seem so fun anymore.

Suddenly, a bush rustled again beside me, and then I realized with intense fear that a cat had hopped onto my back.

But, the fear didn't last long. *No way am I letting this trespasser get the best of me!* Hissing, I flung the cat off immediately. I then whipped around quickly, yowling as I leaped back onto my pursuer, landing on its belly.

"Who are you?" I growled, sinking my claws into the cat's shoulders. I then had to lean my head slightly back as the cat growled and tried to swipe at my muzzle. I hissed back at it and sunk my claws deeper into its shoulders. *And I didn't even leave my territory!* I thought, shocked at how aggressive my attacker was being when I hadn't even done a thing. *Who stuck a bunch of burrs in this cat's fur?*

When my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I noticed that this cat looked very familiar, and I had definitely seen it before at a Gathering once or twice. After some further observation, I realized that he was a black tom with amber eyes that glowed in the night.

Whoa!

"You're Breezepelt!" I blurted out, hopping off of him and shaking out my fur. "Why in the name of StarClan did you attack me?"

I sunk my claws into the ground, preventing myself from jumping back as the WindClan tom hissed at me aggressively. "To get you away from *my* border!" he growled. "WindClan doesn't need any stupid ThunderClan cats stealing prey at a time like this."

What?! Are you kidding me? "I wasn't stealing prey!" I insisted, sinking my claws even deeper into the ground. "I was just doing some night hunting, for goodness sake!"

"That's what they all say!" Breezepelt muttered, rolling his eyes and lashing his tail.

"Well, it's true!" I muttered, rolling my eyes right back at him. "What are *you* doing out here, anyway?"

"Patrolling."

"By yourself?"

"No one else would go with me!" he answered.

"Whatever." I sighed and began to walk away, deciding that this conversation with this irritable tom wasn't going to do anything good for me. "Just mind your own business!" I shouted as I turned away from him.

I don't see how any cat could stand to be around that tom for even a heartbeat! I thought, annoyed as I took one last glance at Breezepelt. *If I had to be a warrior alongside him, I think he'd lose the ability to be a warrior within just a couple of moments.*

I was just starting to disappear out of Breezepelt's sight through some bushes when I heard his voice call again from behind me.

"Wait!"

I narrowed my eyes, wondering why this tom could *possibly* want me to come back.

If he's calling me back just to give me more of a hard time, I'm going to shred his eyeballs out, I thought to myself. I was almost tempted to say it out loud as I reluctantly turned around to pad back to the black tom.

"What?" I asked impatiently, glaring at him. "Make it quick."

When I had turned back to face him, I noticed that Breezepelt's hostile gaze had softened. "Who are you? I've never seen you before," he asked, looking at me from head to paws.

"I'm Goldenshine," I answered, dipping my head to him, realizing that he was trying to be polite and to be honest, I was *shocked*. Breezepelt had never seemed to be a friendly cat from what I had seen and heard, and from what I had encountered just heartbeats earlier.

Breezepelt's ears had flicked as I told him my name. "Ah, I've heard

about you at Gatherings," he meowed, nodding his head slowly. "You were one of the cats that got stuck in the tunnels a while back."

"That's right," I answered, being brought back to my night in the old tunnels with Hollyleaf for just a moment. *Great StarClan, what a night that was,* I thought. *Speaking of night...* I then looked up to the sky to see that the moon wasn't immediately above me anymore, and was clearing its path for the sun to take its place soon.

Suddenly, I was anxious to get back to camp as soon as possible. I knew conversing alone with a WindClan tom wasn't doing me any favors.

"Well, I should probably go now." I murmured quickly, standing up and dipping my head. "It was nice meeting you."

Breezepelt blinked, suddenly looking very thoughtful.

I let out a confused grunt, not being able to read his gaze at all. *I barely know him! Anything could come out of his mouth.*

"Do you want to meet here again?"

My eyes widened with shock. *What in the name of StarClan? That sure came out of nowhere.* "Why?" I asked him simply, for some reason very curious to know the answer.

"I want to get to know you better," he answered, taking a step closer to me as his amber eyes suddenly filled up with eagerness. "Please, just one time?"

I suppressed a growl, taking a step back as Breezepelt had advanced. I already knew that I wasn't going to fall for this nonsense.

I sunk my claws into the dry earth and bared my teeth. "What are you playing at, mouse-brain?" I demanded.

"Nothing!" he insisted. "I just want to spend a little more time with you."

I blinked, realizing that there truly wasn't any sort of malice or anything... *dangerous* looking in Breezepelt's eyes. In fact, they were glowing with something that I hadn't seen much before. Something that made my stomach twist up into a knot as I recognized it.

Does... does this tom like me? I wondered, suddenly feeling tingly inside.

I then shook my head quickly, trying not to let my head rise up to the clouds in the night sky, but for some odd reason, it was very hard.

"Are you joking? But it's against the warrior code!" I realized out loud. *I've never broken the warrior code yet as a warrior,* I thought, eliminating the time that Snowflight and I had escaped the camp as kits. *I didn't plan on ever doing it!*

"No one has to know!" Breezepelt meowed, interrupting my thoughts. "We're not hurting anyone! Come on, meet me here by the stream tomorrow, after sunset."

I narrowed my eyes once again as I remembered something, something that Breezepelt was clearly overlooking about this entire situation.

"Hold on a moment... are you completely flea-brained?" I hissed. "Your father is Crowfeather, right? He did the exact same thing that you want to do right now, and that turned out quite ugly, if you ask me!"

Suddenly, Breezepelt's eyes fell dark, and he bared his teeth and let out a hiss. "That idiot..." he muttered to himself. Then more loudly, he meowed to me, "Obviously he and his... former mate went about it all wrong. All of what he did could have been avoided."

Breezepelt then let out another small hiss and then closed his eyes as he shook his head slowly. "I wish it had been avoided..." he muttered. He then shook his head quickly, seeming to pull himself out of his thoughts, and his amber eyes met my gaze again.

"Please!" He then pleaded, to my surprise. "Just one time. I have to

see you again."

"And I'd like to see another rabbit again and take it back to my Clan to put into the fresh-kill pile, but that's not happening right now with this drought, is it?" I hissed, breaking my gaze away from his. I was growing increasingly more frustrated... but *curious* with the more intent Breezepelt was becoming on getting me to meet with him.

Then, my stomach suddenly felt as it was being flipped upside down as I met Breezepelt's gaze once again. His eyes were more tender, but there was a glint of mystery there. I found that I couldn't look away.

"If you can handle a night stuck in the tunnels, I think you can handle one night with me..." he teased, narrowing his eyes and smirking.

My stomach still fluttering, I then realized that this tom was not going to back down, no matter how many times I tried to say no. If I had to sacrifice just one night away from camp to get this tom to leave me alone, then I would do it.

But, I pricked my ears nervously as I realized that the thought of this tom *not* leaving me alone wasn't a completely unbearable one...

"Fine!" I finally sighed, rolling my eyes. My heart began to beat faster as I saw Breezepelt's eyes immediately light up. I tried to hide the smile that began to emerge on my face. *This shouldn't feel good to me, but it does.*

I sighed again and then looked up to see the moon high in the sky.

Great StarClan, I've been gone for a while! I thought, trying to push down my panic. *Thornclaw will for sure be worried.*

Realizing this, I met Breezepelt's gaze and meowed, "I have to go now." Without waiting for the tom's response, I then began to pad towards the ThunderClan camp as quickly as I could.

"Okay, Goldenshine. I'll see you soon." Breezepelt murmured. I briefly looked back at him to see him still smirking with his eyes

narrowed.

As I turned away and continued to pelt back to camp, that very look Breezepelt had been giving me didn't leave my mind. *I feel so... weird,* I thought. *What am I thinking? What am I doing? I don't even know him!*

I tried to push the thoughts away for the moment when I finally arrived back to camp. I came in to see that Thornclaw was still standing guard. I could barely walk anymore as I trotted past him.

Thornclaw watched me as I slugged forward. "Any luck?" Thornclaw whispered, tilting his head.

I blinked and froze as I realized that I had completely forgotten to hunt for prey.

You idiot! "Nope," I said, hesitating before I had spoken. I bit my lip to keep the secret I was keeping from spilling out all over my unsuspecting father. I couldn't even imagine how he would react if he found out that I was meeting a tom from another Clan tomorrow night.

"Oh, that's too bad! But it's probably for the best, because you need some sleep! It's past moonhigh," Thornclaw meowed, pointing his nose towards the warriors den. "Dawn will arrive soon."

I begun to do as my father told me before pausing, turning back around to face him. "Won't Brambleclaw or Firestar need me for a patrol?" I asked worriedly.

"I'll tell him you need to rest."

"Thanks!" I exclaimed, touching my nose to Thornclaw's.

"Now, *get* some rest!" Thornclaw commanded, flicking his tail to the warriors den again.

I gave him a warm look and then proceeded to walk over to where I would be sleeping, suddenly eager to lie down in my nest. Once I arrived inside, I saw that every cat was asleep. I padded over to my nest and practically dropped down into it.

What a night! I seriously wonder what tomorrow will bring, meeting with Breezepelt... My stomach suddenly churned at this thought, and I almost felt... guilty as I realized that I was *excited. But I shouldn't be excited. I should be dreading it. Why am I doing this again?*

Although I was unsure of myself, my body suddenly felt tingly again, just as it had when I looked at Breezepelt's softer gaze for the first time. I wasn't sure why, and I wasn't sure that I *wanted* to know why. Any cat would say that meeting a cat from another Clan would never be something that I would consider doing. But, in was something in that WindClan tom's eyes that had drawn me in. *He had said he wanted to know me more,* I thought. *But... I suppose I want to know more about him as well.*

Then, my mouth suddenly opened up into a huge yawn. *I'm too tired to think for even one more heartbeat,* I thought before I closed my eyes, and letting sleep take over me.

Chapter 7

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

I couldn't sleep at all last night.

The whole time I had been thinking about who my father was, and the fact that Mistpelt had hidden it from me for my *entire* life, or at least since she had come back to the Clans. Right now, of course, I was furious with her, but I could to some extent understand why she would want to hide something like that from me. She was probably ashamed at the fact that Scourge was my father, and didn't even like hearing *herself* talk about him.

I already knew in my heart that I would be able to forgive her soon enough.

But still, every time the realization that Scourge was my father came back to me, my heart almost seemed to stop. It was so outrageous that it was hard to process. *And I was joking when I had predicted that Mistpelt was secretly a savage murder*, I recalled. *Who would have ever thought that one of my parents actually was a savage murder, not my mother, but my* father. *What if no one trusts me anymore?*

I wouldn't be the first cat in ThunderClan with a supposedly "evil" father. I had heard of how Firestar had had a difficult time trusting Brambleclaw back when he was a small kit, because of who is father was - Tigerstar. I was already praying to StarClan that the same wouldn't happen for me.

Brambleclaw does look a lot like Tigerstar, I realized. *I could see how Firestar would be intimidated.*

Firestar had worried for quite a while that Brambleclaw was going to follow the same dangerous path as Tigerstar, but he never did, and hopefully never would. *I would never become a savage murderer*

like Scourge, I thought. *No way in the name of StarClan!*

Drifting away from my thoughts, I stood up in my nest in the warriors den and began to pad outside. I looked up to see that the sky was a bluish-pink and the sun was starting to fall to the bottom of the sky already.

It had been a fair low-key day for me, which was probably for the best, considering everything that was on my mind at the moment. I had gone on the dawn patrol this morning, and then had come back to camp to find the hunting patrol bringing back fresh-kill. I had eaten a mouse, and then I went to the warriors den to take a nap, but I couldn't sleep *again*.

Now mentally and physically exhausted, I sighed and then began to scan my gaze around the camp clearing. Most cats were out on patrols, eating fresh-kill or sleeping in their dens, just like any normal day.

But the one cat that caught my eye was Goldenshine, who was slithering about and looking from side to side as if she was trying to sneak out of camp without being seen.

I narrowed my eyes at this sight. *Hmm...*

I quickly padded up to my daughter, feeling like I needed to intrude as soon as possible. "What do you think you're doing?" I asked Goldenshine. I mean, she had all the right to leave camp when she wanted now, but the fact that she didn't want any cat to see her was suspicious to me.

Goldenshine completely froze as I had approached her.

"Uh..." she murmured, hesitating a lot. "Just going out for an evening stroll, that's all."

"Really?" I meowed and tilted my head. Through Goldenshine's awkwardness and hesitation, I felt like she wasn't serious at all, not just from this encounter, but from how she had been acting previously.

I then reflected on my daughter's latest behavior as I watched how

weirdly she was acting at the moment. She had actually been acting strangely all day. First off, she always looked like something was on her mind. Secondly, she had gone on a hunting patrol earlier in the day, and Sorreltail had told me after they got back that Goldenshine's hunting skills had been *terrible*, and she had been acting as daft as a newly-made apprentice. When she had tried to catch a mouse, she looked as if she had never hunted before in her life, and she *missed* it when it was practically at her paws.

I was brought back to reality as I heard Goldenshine snort. "Yes! Why don't you believe me?" she demanded, clearly starting to get impatient.

"I believe you!" I reassured her. *I think*. "It's just that... you've been acting a little oddly all day." I then padded up closer to my daughter, touching my nose to her ear. "Are you okay?"

"Fine!" she muttered, starting to twitch her tail irritably. "I just want to be alone for a while. Is that so much to ask?"

Without saying anything else, she let out a loud sigh and disappeared through some bushes.

I watched her disappear, suddenly becoming overwhelmed with concern for my kit. *That was incredibly weird*, I thought. *Goldenshine is a stubborn cat, but I don't see her act like that too often. I really hope there's not something she isn't telling me...*

"Hey," I heard a voice suddenly meow behind me.

I turned to see Thornclaw sitting there, his eyes warm and welcoming.

"Hi, there!" I meowed back to him, the look on his face already making me feel a little better. I trotted up to my mate quickly and touched my nose to his. *Nothing like the love of my life to ease my worries a bit.*

I sniffed as we began to pad over to the warriors den to sit down. "I don't suppose you're hiding something from me too," I joked, leaning my head against his shoulder, absolutely exhausted. At this

point, I had found out that Mistpelt, and Goldenshine potentially, had been hiding something from me. I wondered how much more I could handle!

To my complete surprise, after I had spoken, I felt Thornclaw flinch and lash his tail anxiously next to me.

"N-no," he then stammered, scooting a little further away from me, clearly growing nervous. "Of course not, heh. What, do you think I hid a burr in your side of the nest or something?"

Oh, no. What I said was supposed to be a joke.

"If I found a burr in my side of the nest, you would know, because it'd eventually end up on your side of the nest!" I teased, trying to somehow lighten the suddenly very tense mood. But when Thornclaw barely acknowledged my words, I couldn't help but ask, "What's wrong?" I tried to meet his gaze, but it was quite hard, to my dismay.

"*Nothing* is wrong," he insisted, but he *still* was not looking at me.

I couldn't believe what I was hearing and seeing. Thornclaw had never, ever behaved like this before. Up until now, we had told each other everything, literally *everything*. We had made sure as mates that communication was one of our biggest priorities. The closest I had gotten to *not* telling Thornclaw something had been when Ashfur was still in the forest, and that was only because I had assumed that he would leave our territory soon enough.

So, the fact that Thornclaw was suddenly so closed-off and distant, really, *really* scared me.

I immediately had to know what was going on. "Are... are you really hiding something?" I asked nervously. *As terrified as I am to hear the answer, I can't avoid it, even if he's going to say yes.*

But rather than that, Thornclaw didn't say anything, which was almost more unnerving than receiving an answer. He just continued to stare ahead, his eyes full of distress.

I then took a deep breath before deciding to go on. "Don't worry,

Thornclaw," I whispered to him. "I understand if you're uncomfortable and don't want to talk, but I hope you remember that you can tell me anything," I insisted, twinning my tail with his. *I really hope he hasn't forgotten...*

Thank StarClan, Thornclaw finally turned his head to look at me. His gaze warmed for a few heartbeats as he licked my cheek. "Trust me, I know I can," he meowed, tightening his grip on my tail. "And that's one reason why you're so wonderful."

"Oh, goodness," I breathed as I touched my nose to Thornclaw's cheek. *Well... hopefully Thornclaw wanting to end our relationship can be crossed off... I hope*, I thought nervously. *Oh, I really hope.*

I grew even more nervous as Thornclaw then fell silent for a few heartbeats before finally sighing. He looked back at me, his pale blue eyes burning into my hazel ones.

"Well... you're right, I do have something I've been hiding. It was stupid of me to keep this from you for so long, I'm so sorry," he began, not averting his gaze as his eyes suddenly glowed with distress. "I can't put this off any longer. You're my mate, and you're so special to me, you have no idea. So, you deserve to know..."

I held my breath. *Here we go again...*

"I've been training in the Dark Forest," Thornclaw blurted out.

My mouth almost seemed to drop all the way to the ground.

And I thought that finding out that my father was a tiny little murder was mind-blowing.

I knew what the Dark Forest was by now - the opposite side of StarClan; the Place of No Stars; the place where cats who went against the warrior code without any remorse went when they died - cats like Tigerstar, Thistleclaw, Darkstripe...

I hadn't even realized until this moment that these Dark Forest spirits were summoning living cats to train with them, thanks to Thornclaw, but it wouldn't take much for me to know that any cat who thought that their intentions were truly good, was a truly

mouse-brained cat.

But was I going to say that verbatim to Thornclaw? No, as much as I wanted to. And as much as I wanted to press and interrogate him – ask him what he could possibly be thinking – I told myself over and over in my head to stay calm. If Thornclaw had any logical explanation for this, I was going to find it. *And pray to StarClan that there's one at all...*

But out of my shock at the news, the only word that escaped my jaws was, "...What?"

My meow had barely been above a whisper, yet Thornclaw's eyes glinted with alarm and fear as if I had yelled at him. "Did you hear me?" he murmured, his tail twitching.

I took a deep breath, still trying with all of my might to keep my composure. "Oh yeah, I heard you," I muttered as I began to lightly trace one of my claws around the edge of a small hole in the ground.

I then forced myself to look back at Thornclaw. "I'm just trying to understand," I breathed, my heart beginning to beat faster. "Isn't the Dark Forest where really bad cats go? Selfish, malicious, bloodthirsty ones that hurt others in order to benefit themselves?" I hadn't been able to help it, but my voice had nearly risen into a growl. The fact that I was having to explain this to my mate didn't seem *real*.

Thornclaw nodded slowly. "Of course, and that's what you've always been taught," the golden tabby began, his gaze suddenly almost desperate. "But they aren't as bad as you think at all, Lilypetal! In fact, they are helping cats to become better warriors. I want to be the best warrior I can be. For you, and for this whole Clan."

As sweet as the meaning behind Thornclaw's words were, that wasn't enough for me. "So all of these cats, like Tigerstar and Brokenstar who harmed so many just to get their way, suddenly had a change of heart and decided that they want to help and care for the cats that they left behind?" I pressed to Thornclaw. "I'm not sure if this is a good idea."

"Don't you think that I've thought about this?" he meowed, his eyes narrowing. "I wouldn't have done it if I didn't think it would benefit me."

"Well... I'd like to think so," I meowed worriedly. "But Thornclaw, listen... I may not know as much as some other cats may here, but I know for a fact that surrounding yourself with those cats is probably a *terrible* idea!"

Thornclaw's gaze was steadily becoming more and more unreadable. "You can't even try to see the good in it?" he meowed. I wondered if I had only imagined the crack of hurt in his voice.

I slowly shook my head in reply. It was becoming more and more difficult to keep calm with each thing that Thornclaw said, and each heartbeat that went by. I wasn't hearing anything that was making me feel better, as I had hoped I would. "I can't, and I *won't*, Thornclaw, I'm sorry!" I insisted, hardening my meow. "Can you not see that you are betraying your Clan by doing that?"

Thornclaw growled and then stood up. I almost backed away, bewildered by my mate's gaze and his new, different demeanor. "*Betraying* my Clan?" he repeated, his voice rising into a growl. "*You* are calling me a traitor?"

I stood up as well, sinking my claws into the ground. "Well, you're not exactly the leader of loyalty right now, are you?" I demanded. "Training with cats that have been traitors themselves doesn't exactly make yourself look very good!"

For a moment, seeing the alarm in Thornclaw's eyes, I wondered if I should pull back. I was extremely outraged and bewildered by what Thornclaw had shared with me, but I never enjoyed scolding someone, especially someone as dear to me as my mate.

But with what Thornclaw said next, all of those thoughts immediately flew away, my sanity probably flying away with them.

"Are you kidding? Wow, you seem very set on thinking the lowest of me, don't you? I-I'd think you'd be *proud* of me!" he hissed at me. "The Dark Forest has only made me stronger!"

"What a whole load of mouse-droppings!" I exclaimed without thinking, "That's what they're trying to *make* you think!"

Suddenly, as my mind was spiraling, words full of hurt and fear just began to spill out of me. I mean, I felt betrayed. I felt *lied* to. I wondered if I even knew who Thornclaw was anymore, considering this completely outrageous choice that he had made.

In that moment, whatever Thornclaw would have to say to defend himself, I didn't want to hear it. "Like I said, I don't know everything, but what else could the Dark Forest cats want than to make you one of them?" I added, trying to control myself, but failing for the most part now.

Thornclaw then bared his teeth and sunk his unsheathed claws into the ground in anger. I tried my hardest to suppress a whimper of grief and distress. Sure, Thornclaw and I had had petty bickers in the past, but never a full-on argument. *Ever*. I had realized almost immediately that it didn't feel good at all, but here we were, and there wasn't going back.

Thornclaw's pale blue eyes then seemed to be blazing with betrayal. "Well, now I know why I was so hesitant to tell you about this," my mate then scoffed. "I knew that you would just think badly of me, and unfortunately I was right."

I lashed my tail and gasped. I couldn't believe what I was hearing *all over again. Did I become mates with a* kit*, for StarClan's sake?!*

I wasn't having any of this anymore. Who cared if we were arguing? If Thornclaw was going to act like a petty young cat, then I wasn't going to let him get away with it.

"Well, I don't have much of a choice, Thornclaw!" I then barked back. "The Dark Forest is our enemy – cats who have done nothing but hurt others for their own benefit - and you are training *with* them!" I then began to pace, realizing that I would explode if I didn't get my paws moving. "Geez, do I know more that you do?" I growled. "That's concerning, considering I was a *kittypet* for half of my life!"

Thornclaw hissed, his eyes blaring at me once again. "I can't believe it! What's happened to you?" Thornclaw growled back. "A real mate would be supportive of all my decisions, wouldn't they? That's definitely not what you're doing!"

My mouth dropped open again, my head seeming to throb with how angry I was. "Well, I've never had anything to *say* against you until now. But if you tell me something that I don't like or that worries me, I'm going to tell you!" *I'm sorry, I didn't realize that you wanted to be with a she-cat that stays quiet when she disagrees with you!*

I was barely thinking before speaking at this point. "I'm sorry, Thornclaw, but I *can't* agree with you on this! It would be incredibly difficult for me to be *proud* of a cat that is training with dangerous, ill-natured cats that have *betrayed* us!"

I then watched as Thornclaw's eyes flashed with hurt, more hurt than if I had physical slashed my claws across his muzzle. "Well, if you have such a big problem with that, maybe we shouldn't be mates anymore," Thornclaw then meowed sharply, his eyes a pair of pale blue flames once again.

I flattened my ears and my eyes widened as my heart nearly stopped and then seemed to fall onto the ground. I truly had never thought that those words would come out of Thornclaw's mouth.

But they had, and I wasn't going to stand around whimpering to him like a kit.

Without hesitating anymore, I let out a small growl. "Fine! If that's how you want it!" I then whipped myself around and started walking quickly over towards the warriors den.

"Lilypetal..." I heard Thornclaw murmur behind me, his voice full of remorse. "Wait..."

But I ignored the golden tabby tom and slid into the warriors den to my nest once again.

Chapter 8

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

I shivered as I snuck through the forest by myself, the last chills of leaf-bare still lingering in the forest. As I traveled, I looked up to the sky to see that it was a bright orange, mixed with a pink color. The sun was beginning to sink behind the trees.

I hope I'm not late for Breezepelt, I realized, my stomach fluttering as I thought about him again. The more that the fact that I was meeting with him set in, the more... *eager* that I got. I wasn't sure how I felt about that still. *I've never been so confused about my own feelings before,* I realized. *Maybe this is why I've always stuck to my warrior duties and nothing else!*

I started to walk a little faster, looking from side to side every once in a while to see if I was being watched. Lilypetal had almost blown my cover earlier and I didn't want that to happen again. *Mothers always seem to know everything,* I thought, annoyed. *Hopefully only* Lilypetal *being suspicious is the extent of it...*

Suddenly, as I traveled closer and closer to the end of ThunderClan's territory, WindClan scent began to flood through my nose, and I heard the faint water noises of the stream that marked the border between WindClan and ThunderClan's territory.

Here I was, where Breezepelt and I had decided to meet. It was then that I realized that I wasn't feeling guilty or paranoid of being caught at all, and only anticipated the WindClan warrior's arrival.

"Breezepelt?" I then whispered, padding closer to where the stream was, looking around and trying to stay as quiet as I could.

"Goldenshine!" I heard an excited voice meow immediately after.

I slid through some bushes and saw Breezepelt waiting for me,

standing by the stream. Looking at him for the first time since last night, my stomach almost seemed to flip upside down. *Breezepelt sure is a handsome cat, isn't he?* I couldn't help but think.

"Hi," I meowed nicely, touching my nose to his, trying not to show how nervous I was all of the sudden.

"Hey," he purred as he stared warmly at me. "I'm glad you could make it."

I returned the warm gaze and wrapped my tail nearly around my paws. "So, what did you want to do?" I asked, narrowing my eyes. "You were pretty intent on doing this, so you better have plans!"

Breezepelt winked and then lightly touched his tail tip to my shoulder. "How 'bout we go for a walk?"

I nodded and stood up, feeling all tingly again like I had last night when we had first encountered each other. *This feels so weird!* I thought, *Why did he even want to meet up, anyway? Why did I agree to it?* This cat had just asked me to take a walk with him. It was something so simple, but the fact that a cat from another Clan was asking me to do it made it a big deal. I almost felt disgusted with myself, reflecting on the fact that I had agreed to it so easily.

But as disgusted with my own actions and feelings as I was, I padded up to stand beside Breezepelt, and we both began to walk along the stream, making sure to be cautious of other cats possibly being around.

"So, what is your life like in ThunderClan?" Breezepelt asked, stepping over so his fur brushed mine.

I didn't pull away. "Normal as any warrior's life, I suppose!" I purred happily. "But don't get me wrong, it's all my absolute dream. It's been since I was a kit. Every part of it is perfect. I go on patrols everyday, hunt for prey, *eat* prey, take naps..."

A purr rumbled in Breezepelt's throat. "Being a warrior really is wonderful," the black tom agreed. "But sometimes it's pretty stressful."

"Yeah, for sure," I murmured. "The taking naps part of my day rarely ever happens!" As Breezepelt let out a small purr of amusement, I then asked, "Do you like being in WindClan?"

Breezepelt snorted, "Some of the warriors can be real mouse-brains, but it's a good Clan, I suppose. It's all I know."

He then nudged me on the shoulder. "At least we're not like ThunderClan. You all think that you're better than any of us!" He meowed teasingly.

My mouth dropped, and I nudged Breezepelt back. "*So* not true, you flea-brain!" I purred, lightly swiping one of paws across his ear. "You better watch your mouth, or I'm going to leave right now!"

"Oh, please don't," Breezepelt then meowed, purring as well, but I actually sensed some sincerity in his meow.

I let out a quiet *mrrow* of laughter and gazed warmly at him. He looked back at me, returning the glance, then turned back his head to look ahead.

For a little while we walked in silence. Before I knew it, the sun was gone, and the stars of Silverpelt spread all over the sky, just as they had been when Breezepelt and I had met just the night before.

As the two of us continued to walk alongside each other, suddenly, out of the corner of my eye, I could see Breezepelt's head turn toward me, and he stared with his eyes glittering.

I stopped and looked at him, my stomach twisting for the hundredth time that night. If Breezepelt had stared at me like this last night, he would have lost his ability *to* stare within heartbeats, but now...

"Why are you looking at me?" I asked, trying to hide my excited smile. *And why do I like that you are?*

"No reason," Breezepelt purred, smiling back at me, his eyes still sparkling.

My eyes then widened as he slowly moved his tail towards mine. *Oh*

my StarClan, oh my StarClan... When he was close enough, he twined it with his.

I closed my eyes for a moment, sure that Breezepelt would be able to hear my heart beating. *Why does this all feel so... nice? Why don't I feel badly about this?*

My ears grew hot as I decided to step to stand closer to Breezepelt, leaning my head forward and brushing my muzzle against his, not feeling a single twinge of regret.

He blinked, gasped, and then looked at me in shock. I purred quietly, looking back at the WindClan warrior with warm eyes.

Then Breezepelt returned it, and we stood like that for several moments before I felt the black tom tap his tail against my shoulder, nodding his head to the large oak tree in front of us.

"Race you up that tree!" he meowed challengingly. He got a head start and started to climb up the tall oak tree.

"Hey, not fair!" I purred and raced to catch up to him. I leaped up to get a grip on the tree and quickly started to climb up, feeling so happy and exhilarated. *I'm having so much fun!* I realized as I clawed the bark, trying to catch up to Breezepelt. *Not that I don't have an extreme amount of fun when I'm back in ThunderClan but... this is just... fun! Plain 'ol fun!*

Breezepelt was ahead of me by one fox-length, but then I hopped onto a low branch and was able to get past him.

"Hey!" he shouted, still climbing behind me.

I purred as I climbed, sure that I was going to win this race. When I nearly made it to the top of the big oak, my paws suddenly lost their grip and I began to plummet down the tree. Everything became a blur as I watched each branch I had jumped off of pass my gaze as I fell.

"Goldenshine!" Breezepelt shouted. His yowl sounded like barely more than a whisper in my ear.

I landed on the ground with a big thump, and all the breath was immediately knocked out of me. I struggled for breath, rolling onto my side. *Well, I suppose I'm not having a lot of fun at the moment...*

I watched as Breezepelt leaped down the tree, and he was next to me within a heartbeat.

"Are you okay?" he demanded, staring at me with wide eyes and running his tail gently along my flank. He then bent his head down to lick urgently at my head. "Please be okay..."

"I'll *be* okay," I wheezed, letting the tom's slow licks sooth me. "J-just landed on my back and lost my breath for a moment!"

"Thank StarClan," Breezepelt sighed, touching his nose to mine.

Yeah, thank StarClan, I thought. *What would we have done if I had gotten seriously hurt? Breezepelt would have had to bring me to ThunderClan camp himself, and then every cat would know what we're doing!*

I suddenly became confused as Breezepelt froze and then lifted his head up from where he had been looking at me. He sniffed and looked ahead. I flicked my ears and watched him nervously.

"I smell ThunderClan," he muttered.

"It's me, mouse-brain," I meowed, trying to stand up. *And we're just inside ThunderClan territory, hopefully you would smell ThunderClan!*

"I thought that I could smell something else..." Breezepelt muttered, half to himself. "But you're right. Maybe I'm just extra paranoid." he then murmured, walking to stand beside me. "Hopefully you're right."

"Of course I am, silly!" I purred, shaking out my fur. "Never doubt a cat who has been stuck in the tunnels for a whole night. Their word is holy!"

Then we both sat down, howling with laughter before falling silent with the forest around us. I laid my head on Breezepelt's shoulder, and he rested his muzzle on my head, and we stood there together

by the stream.

This is amazing, I realized. *We don't even have to talk to each other. Just being with Breezepelt makes me so happy. How?* I was still so bewildered by my actions of the night. It was almost as if me, Goldenshine, was watching myself from the outside and seeing all of the things I was doing. I was wanting to yell at myself and tell myself that what I was doing was wrong, and that I shouldn't enjoy this time with this warrior from another Clan. After all, I had spent my whole life wanting to be the most dedicated ThunderClan warrior possible. Was I throwing that all away by meeting with Breezepelt like this?

I was then pulled from my questioning thoughts as a rustle came from some bushes behind us. I looked at Breezepelt, but he was staring ahead bravely, and he didn't say anything.

"What is going on here?" A voice beamed, spreading through the forest. I flinched at the strength of the voice.

Then, another rustle came from some other bushes, closer this time, and a cat came out to stand in front of us. I wanted to sink to the ground as I recognized the familiar appearance of the cat who had bright ginger fur, broad shoulders and green eyes.

It was Firestar.

Chapter 9

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

I froze as Firestar's bright green gaze burned into mine. And in a way, I had never felt more terrified in my life as I awaited to see how much trouble I was in. Why be scared of taking on badgers or chasing off foxes, when you could be up awake at night fearing a stern talking to from your leader?

My ears grew extremely hot and my paws shifted back and forth nervously as Firestar began to speak. "Goldenshine, what are you doing here with this WindClan cat?" Firestar asked, not averting his gaze even a little bit.

"The 'WindClan cat' is named is Breezepelt, thank you," Breezepelt muttered, just loud enough for Firestar to hear.

I tried to suppress a whimper of distress. "What are you doing here?" I blurted out, not realizing that I was speaking to the ThunderClan leader. I found that I was extremely upset that Firestar had interrupted the amazing time I had been having with Breezepelt, and I suddenly wasn't thinking rationally. The Goldenshine watching me from the outside would have thrown me against a tree, shocked at my idiocy.

"I was talking a night stroll," Firestar answered evenly, seeming to ignore my harshness. "What's more important is the reason why *you* are here."

I let out a stressed-out sigh, and my gaze met Breezepelt's as I looked back at him. His eyes were filled with both love and anger at once. It was so hard to see, but also so difficult to look away from. I then tried to think of what to say to explain myself, and then stepped forward to face Firestar. As I met the leader's gaze once again, I suddenly was overwhelmed with guilt. Yes, I didn't regret meeting with Breezepelt, and I enjoyed our time together so much...

shockingly, but nevertheless, the seething gaze that the leader was giving me suddenly made me question it.

"I'm so sorry, Firestar!" I meowed, trying to suppress a whimper. "This is the first time we've ever done this, and I know it is against the rules, but we aren't hurting our Clans at all!"

"Goldenshine," Firestar said, raising his voice, "Meeting with cats from other Clans is *highly* against the warrior code. Doing this, you are betraying your Clan."

And he's right, I told myself, hanging down my head and my mind suddenly spiraling. *What have I been thinking? What happened to me?* Just moments ago, I had been upset that Firestar had walked in on my time with a WindClan warrior, but the more that he spoke, the more that I finally saw sense. Why had I met with Breezepelt? Yes, he was fun, and exciting and kind, but why had I cared so much? I should have shoved those feelings down and forgotten about him forever, but I hadn't. I had let my feelings get the best of me.

Which... I suppose they always do in a way. That's why I escaped the camp with Snowflight when I was a kit, why I drove myself to train as best I could as an apprentice, and why I leaped into those tunnels after Hollyleaf... I thought. *This time, it just happened to cause me to do something that really,* really *got me in trouble.*

I dipped my head, knowing that every word the ThunderClan leader said was true. *The Goldenshine that was watching me be ridiculous from the outside has now returned to home base.* "I am so, so sorry," I repeated hoarsely.

"'Sorry' doesn't fix what you've done," Firestar pointed out. "You are to never meet with Breezepelt again, and as punishment for breaking the warrior code, you are to do all of the apprentice duties for a moon."

That's what I deserve.

I sniffed as Firestar started to walk away. "You may say your goodbyes to Breezepelt, but you must never meet with him again." Just as he finished his sentence, he disappeared into some brambles, and

his footsteps became quieter and quieter the further away he got.

I listened to the sounds of the ThunderClan leader fall quiet before turning to Breezepelt, whose eyes were filled with hurt. My eyes clouded and I twinned my tail with his, knowing that I was going to do what Firestar had told me to. I had to say goodbye.

"I can't believe your leader is making us do this!" Breezepelt's voice croaked with emotion. "I care about you so much, Goldenshine. I don't want to lose you now!"

I smiled weakly as I stared back at the WindClan tom, almost is if to help me power through the situation. I had to force my words out from how overwhelmed with sadness I was. "I feel the same way, Breezepelt," I whispered, wincing as I almost thought I felt a physical pang of sadness. "This is... so, so hard..."

At this point, it doesn't matter of the choices I made. It's already done, but I can't help but wonder... h ow do I have such strong feelings for a cat I just met?

We put our heads together and stayed there for quite a long time, the crickets chirping quietly and the stream flowing close by as we drank in each other's scents. Then, after several heartbeats, Breezepelt let out a shaky sigh and then lifted lifted his head to looked up at the sky. I took a deep breath, preparing for what I knew he was going to say.

"It's nearly dawn," he realized, beginning to back away. "I-I should go." he forced out, acting as if he had just told a cat that it was okay for them to kill his mother right in front of him. Breezepelt then looked down to the ground and murmured, "Bye. I'm praying to StarClan that this isn't the last time we see each other..."

"Me too. Maybe at a Gathering sometime?" I agreed, feeling as if my heart was being ripped out from inside of me from how much pain I was in. "Bye," I then meowed, sighing and taking a step back. *This is what you need to do. Stop being so sad!*

I watched sadly as Breezepelt walked slowly past some bushes before trudging across the stream.

Without looking back at me, he then hopped out of the water and ran into WindClan territory.

Chapter 10

[image]

Snowflight's POV

"I think it's about time you went back to your own Clan," Jayfeather commented, observing Rainstorm as the mottled gray tom stood up from his nest. "Are you fit enough to travel now?"

"Of course!" Rainstorm snapped. "I didn't want to come here in the first place, you mouse-brain!"

I tried not to purr with laughter as Rainstorm then let out an irritated breath before leaving the medicine den, not thanking us or anything at all. I stared back at the medicine den entrance where he had disappeared. *Well... I guess I wouldn't have been in the best mood either if I was practically being held hostage by another Clan, I suppose!*

Rainstorm had spent the past half-moon in ThunderClan in order to recover. Jayfeather and I had overseen his wounds and let him get *plenty* of rest. Unfortunately though, the half-moon had felt like a lot more than just a half-moon.
With Rainstorm's impatience and short temper, he didn't make Jayfeather and I treating him much fun.

"It'll be nice to have that mouse-brained furball out of here," Jayfeather muttered, almost having repeated my thoughts. "He was a real pain in the tail!"

I snorted, gathering up Rainstorm's old nest to dispose of the next time that I left the medicine den. "I have to agree with you, even thought I hate to think badly of any cat," I purred, lashing my tail.

"Of course *you* don't," Jayfeather muttered. "That's something we certainly don't have in common."

I let out a *mrrow* of laughter and then padded over to Jayfeather to help him organize herbs. "You know, Jayfeather, life would maybe

be a little more fun if you could just try to tolerate cats a little more?" I suggested to my former mentor, but not really thinking he would actually take any sort of suggestion I gave him. *Like he'd take advice from his former apprentice, but I might as well trim even if I'm teasing!*

Jayfeather just snorted. "I suppose I could do that, Snowflight," he replied. "But it's quite difficult when everyone in the Clan is a complete mouse-brain all of the time."

I rolled my eyes and purred in amusement. "Great StarClan!" I exclaimed. I shook my head and turned back to the herbs from where I had been looking at Jayfeather. "Well, I suppose training an apprentice is a bit of an improvement. Hopefully I wasn't a huge pain in the tail?" *Almost any cat wouldn't be able to surpass Rainstorm, I have to say.*

To my surprise, after a few heartbeats, Jayfeather meowed in a more gentle voice than usual, "Nope, not even a little bit." I then noticed him shake his head quickly, and continue on with his herbs. He then meowed in his more normal tone of voice, "I got lucky with you."

I then let out one last purr of amusement, proceeding to pick up a stack of herbs and begin to put them in their piles. Just within a quarter moon of me training as a medicine cat, Jayfeather had actually taught me a really interesting way to organize the herbs. I quite liked it, so I stuck to it.

It was what I was still doing when just a few heartbeats later, Goldenshine padded into the den.

"Uh, could I have some moss dipped in mouse-bile, please?" she asked as soon as she had come in.

I turned around from my work to face my sister, my eyes wide. "*Again?*" I exclaimed. "Why do you need moss and *mouse-bile* so much?" This was now the fourth or fifth time that Goldenshine had come to the medicine den for mouse-bile.

"To get ticks off of the elders. Duh."

I tilted my head to the side. "Why would you do that?"

"I'm being punished!" Goldenshine meowed, growing impatient all of the sudden. "I ate prey before I gave some to the Clan on a hunting patrol about a half-moon ago."

What's her problem? I wondered. *For one, Goldenshine doesn't break the warrior code, and two, why does she have even more of a spunky attitude than usual?*

I tilted my head. Goldenshine had hesitated greatly when she'd spoken, along with it not sounding like something she would do in the first place. So, I decided to question her further, as reluctant as I was to face the confrontation. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure!" Goldenshine growled, causing me to cower back slightly. "Why would you think I'm hiding something? Why do you not believe me?"

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. The last time that Goldenshine had given me this much attitude was when I had told her I wanted to be a medicine cat, and that was moons and moons ago!

"I do believe you!" I insisted, shocked at how defensive Goldenshine was all of the sudden. "You just didn't seem sure about what you were saying."

"Whatever," Goldenshine murmured, breaking her gaze away from me and beginning to scan her head around the den. "So, where's my mouse-bile moss?"

I heard Jayfeather sigh next to me, seemingly annoyed, before picking up some moss. He reluctantly dipped it in mouse-bile and then gave it to Goldenshine.

"Thanks," Goldenshine meowed through a full mouth. After that, she simply let out a small groan and left the den.

I sat down and watched her go, lashing my tail anxiously. To say the least, I was shocked with every piece of the encounter I had just had with my sister. *She was very rude, and she apparently broke the*

warrior code a half-moon ago. What's gotten into her?

I tried to push down my nervous feelings, replacing them with rational explanations. *Well, every warrior isn't perfect, as much as I know that Goldenshine wants to be. Maybe she was so hungry that she couldn't help herself...*

"Wow, your sister is so friendly isn't she?" Jayfeather said sarcastically, interrupting my thoughts.

I let out a sigh, letting myself be amused by Jayfeather's comment rather than sitting around and worrying. "And you're one to talk!" I teased, gently nudging Jayfeather with my tail. "She's just in a bad mood, I'm sure. It's probably not fun being punished." *I'm almost trying to tell myself that more than him...*

"I have to admit, I know how she feels," Jayfeather commented, rolling his blind eyes.

I let out a quiet gasp, staring wide-eyed at my formal mentor. *Jayfeather showing some vulnerability? What a nice surprise today!* "Really?" I asked, looking at him, suddenly very intrigued.

"I always got in trouble with Lionblaze and Hollyleaf when we were kits," he explained, shaking his head slowly as if he hated what he was saying. "Lionblaze's and Hollyleaf's warrior ceremony was actually delayed because they got in trouble so much, those mouse-brains..."

I let out a little *mrrow* of laughter, very amused by the quick anecdote. I murmured, "Wow," and then continued to organize my herbs.

After me and Jayfeather had worked on the herbs for quite a long time, Jayfeather stopped with his herbs and turned to face me as if he could see.

"So, the gathering's coming before we know it," he began.

Oh! "Yeah!" I meowed, suddenly mesmerized by the thought of the Gathering. "What about it?"

"Would you like to come with me?"

"Yes!" I yowled with excitement, hopping up in the air. As of now, I had only been to two gatherings - one as a warrior apprentice and one as a newly-made medicine cat apprentice. I had had to stay in the medicine den for many of the Gatherings after that while Jayfeather went by himself. At my first one as a warrior apprentice, I had stayed by Brackenfur most of the time and I didn't speak to anyone else, and at my second one, I mainly just got to know the other medicine cats, not having much of a chance to meet anyone else.

"Great," he meowed as I had answered.

I nodded to him and then absentmindedly but happily continued to fix my herbs. "Oh, I can't wait, Jayfeather!" I commented, my mind suddenly drowning in thoughts of the Gathering. Would anything interesting happen? Who would I meet? What would the other Clan leaders have to say?

"You know what I can't wait for? These herb stocks to be finished and organized. Get on it," Jayfeather muttered, pulling me from my thoughts once again and nudging me softly.

I purred and rolled my eyes. At this point, none of Jayfeather's harsh words got to me anymore. I knew that he was never truly sincere, and especially now, all I could think about at this point was how ecstatic I was for the full moon!

This Gathering is going to be really fun! I thought. *My first gathering as a* real *medicine cat!*

Chapter 11

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

I was lying just under the Highledge, basking in the warm sun, when I noticed that Brambleclaw was slowly walking over to me.

"Hi, Lilypetal," he meowed kindly, lashing his tail to me in greeting.

I lifted my head from where I was sunning on the ground. "Hello, Brambleclaw!" I meowed, trying to sound as cheerful as I could despite how down I was feeling at the moment.

In fact, I had been in a slump for quite a while now, about a half-moon to be exact. *So* much had happened, and I didn't know what to do about *any* of it; First off, Thornclaw and I hadn't spoken to each other at all since our awful quarrel.

At first, I had only stayed away from the golden tabby in order to calm down and clear my head, but once I had, I found that I didn't even want to bother anymore; he didn't want to be mates any longer, anyway, so I suppose I was only doing him a favor. He hadn't made any advances since the argument, so I figured it was exactly what he wanted.

Of course, I was hurting. I mean, I was still in love with Thornclaw, and I felt like almost anything around me made me think of him and our time together - our hunting trips, our times with Goldenshine and Snowflight in the nursery, sharing meals, our late-night walks, and just talking together. I wanted it all back, and there had already been so many times where I was tempted to run over to the golden tabby and try to resolve the conflict. I missed him *immensely*.

But through my grief, I tried to remind myself of how angry I had been as we yowled at each other, how disappointed I had been in Thornclaw's choice. I suppose I did believe him when he said he

was only doing it to become a better warrior, but the way he had lashed out at me, to me, was unacceptable.

So that was one thing, another being that I had found out that my father was one of the most evil cats ever known to the Clans. And on top of that, Goldenshine was clearly keeping secrets from me. I still didn't know what she was up to, because she definitely was up to *something*. She had been very closed-off and quite irritable, to be honest. She was an obstinate and headstrong she-cat, but never *rude*. I was very worried about her, to say the least.

Trying to escape my adversities for just a moment, I shook my head quickly and then proceeded to tilt my head to Brambleclaw as he spoke. "A few more cats can go to the gathering tonight," the dark brown tabby tom began. "Would you like to come along?"

I sighed and and forced myself to stand up, trying not to let Brambleclaw see how I was truly feeling inside. "Sure!" I meowed kindly, nodding my head and pushing myself to look at things a little more positively. "A Gathering is just what I need right now!"

I watched as Brambleclaw then dipped his head. "Okay, great! I'll let Firestar know." He then began to walk away, but I stared in curiosity and he then paused and looked back at where I stood.

"Oh! I have been meaning to thank you again, Lilypetal," Brambleclaw meowed as he padded back up to me, "for helping Squirrelflight and I settle our... *quarrel,* you could say. We're finally happy again thanks to you. I really appreciate it so much."

My initial reaction was to let out a sigh of relief at Brambleclaw's words. I truly was very happy for him and Squirrelflight. When I had first found out that Squirrelflight had been hiding the fact that Lionblaze, Jayfeather, and Hollyleaf weren't her kits, and that Brambleclaw didn't know, I had felt terribly for him. It had been even more difficult to watch his reaction when Hollyleaf had spilled the news at the full-moon Gathering. He had ended things with Squirrelflight immediately, to my dismay.

Out of my desperation to help the situation, I had run up to the ThunderClan deputy and tried to give him Squirrelflight's side of

the story. I had then led him over to his former mate to talk, and he had told Squirrelflight that he needed some time. And that, he did, taking several sunrises to process the situation before feeling comfortable around his mate again. But from what I had seen, it had all worked, and Brambleclaw was slowly understanding more and more the reason behind Squirrelflight's actions.

As relieved as I was, hearing about a happy couple all of the sudden made me think about Thornclaw and our situation all over again. At the time, us being happy again felt like something that couldn't be obtained in another *universe*.

I suddenly felt like I wouldn't be able to feign happiness anymore. It all still felt so fresh. I gave Brambleclaw another small nod and then meowed to him, softly, "Don't mention it, Brambleclaw, I was incredibly happy to help where I could. I'm glad you two are doing well together."

And clearly, Brambleclaw noticed. "What's the matter?" Brambleclaw asked, concern glowing in his eyes. He clearly had noticed that the joy had been sucked out of me just a tad.

I looked up at the tom to meet his gaze, taking a deep breath. For some reason I felt like I could confide in Brambleclaw. He was such a clam and level-headed cat, and he was a friend; I had a feeling he wouldn't make me regret being so vulnerable.

But I still shifted my paws uncomfortably as I answered the ThunderClan deputy. "I'm not sure if word has gotten out yet... but me and Thornclaw aren't doing so well," I admitted to Brambleclaw, letting my tail droop to the ground. "We had a quarrel not too long ago."

Brambleclaw almost seemed to purr with amusement after I finished. I tilted my head, wondering what had been funny about what I said.

"Great StarClan, I know how you feel!" He purred, rolling his eyes.

I stared back at the tabby tom with intrigue. "You do?" I asked curiously. "How so?"

Brambleclaw snorted, sitting down. "Before you found your way to the Clans, Squirrelflight and I argued... *a lot!*"

I stared at him in shock. *Wow! I could never imagine that!*

Brambleclaw went on. "It was all pretty ridiculous, though. I don't think what we fought about was worth fighting about at all, if I'm being honest," he explained. "And Great StarClan, how we argued when she was an apprentice! It was like trying to handle a stubborn badger!"

I smiled and let out an amused purr. "Heh, a stubborn badger would have been easier, right?" I teased. And as Brambleclaw let out a *mrrow* of laughter, I then asked, "How did you two become mates at all if you spent all of your time arguing?" I asked, feeling a little better even from just this lighthearted conversation.

Brambleclaw shrugged. "They were all pretty silly arguments, to be honest. And I think we both actually had feelings for each other from the start, but we didn't quite know how to explain it to each other. Anyway,"

Brambleclaw then padded up to put his tail tip on my shoulder. "Being a cat who has been in the rut of many arguments with... *someone*..."

I let out a quiet purr of amusement before nodding to the dark brown tabby, allowing him to go on.

"I'm sure you and Thornclaw will be fine," Brambleclaw reassured me. "Maybe a little time is what the both of you need."

I looked back at Brambleclaw with a gaze full of gratitude, and before I could respond to his advice, I looked up past the ThunderClan deputy to see Thornclaw staring at me from where he was lying near the warriors den, Brackenfur and Cloudtail beside him. His gaze was a mix of so many different emotions that I couldn't even pick out one. So, I guess trying to get a grasp of what he was feeling was out of the question, basically.

I moved my head back from peering to see that Brambleclaw was

looking back at Thornclaw too.

"Do you want me to talk to him for you?" he suddenly asked, nudging me on the shoulder.

I gasped as I met the warrior's gaze, feeling overwhelmed with relief. "Oh, could you? If you get the chance?" I asked, twitching my tail anxiously. *Anything to find out where he stands, I suppose. If Brambleclaw is offering, I certainly won't stop him!* "It's completely alright, if not."

Suddenly, I flicked my gaze over to the Highledge as I noticed Firestar peek his head out of his den. He glanced over in our direction, flicked his ears, and then leaped down from the ledge to pad up to Brambleclaw.

"I know it's almost sunhigh, Brambleclaw, but can you send out a hunting patrol?" The ThunderClan leader asked. "The fresh-kill pile is looking weak." He then glanced over at the pile, which at this point only consisted of a squirrel and a couple of mice.

Brambleclaw dipped his head. "Yes, Firestar. I'll set one up now."

"Thank you," Firestar meowed before jumping back up to the Highledge and into his den.

Brambleclaw turned back to me after watching Firestar go. I couldn't help but purr with amusement as I noticed that his eyes were narrowed, and he had a huge smirk on his face.

"I'll talk to Thornclaw when I take him on the hunting patrol." He winked and then turned to face to where the whole clearing could hear him.

"Hunting patrol! I need Sandstorm, Brightheart, and Thornclaw. I'll lead it!"

I whipped my head over to the warriors den and watched Thornclaw as he sighed and padded slowly over to Brambleclaw, Sandstorm and Brightheart close behind him. As they convened and then started to walk together, I noticed that Brambleclaw was slowing his pace to stand next to Thornclaw in the back. I began to

pace as I then watched them all vanish out of camp. Sighing, I trotted over and lied back down in the same I had originally been relaxing in the bright sun.

As I lied down, I was prayed to StarClan that Brambleclaw's talk with Thornclaw would be successful. *As angry, hurt and confused that I am... I really hope that Thornclaw and I will work out...* I thought, *Brambleclaw and Squirrelflight made up after all of their quarrels, so why can't we?*

Chapter 12

[image]

Snowflight's POV

I was hopping with excitement as I padded beside Jayfeather on the way to the Gathering. I felt as if I could barely contain myself! *This almost feels like my first full-moon Gathering, it's been so long. At least, it feels like it!*

"Jayfeather, I can't wait!" I squealed out loud to my former mentor, gently nosing him to the side as we veered around a tree.

"I sure can," Jayfeather muttered begrudgingly beside me.

I rolled my eyes, amused by Jayfeather's words. "Well, of course!" I purred, wrapping my tail around his back to guide him through some thick undergrowth. "You've been to many more Gatherings than I have!"

"And I'd be thankful for that, Snowflight," Jayfeather went on, staring down at the ground as if he could see. "There may be a truce expected at these Gatherings, but it isn't always obeyed..."

I stared at Jayfeather, my heart filling up with concern at Jayfeather's. It took me a moment to remember why my former mentor would feel this way, before remembering that crazy night six moons ago when Hollyleaf had told the entire Gathering who their real parents were. It had caused Hollyleaf, along with Goldenshine, to almost die in a tunnel collapse, and Jayfeather, Lionblaze, and Hollyleaf now held a grudge against Leafpool and Squirrelflight for lying to them.

Poor Jayfeather... I thought to myself, continuing to stare at my former mentor with concern. *And since then he's still had to come to these Gatherings and face all of these cats after what his sister did.*

"I completely understand," I meowed softly as ThunderClan began

to walk alongside the lake. I sighed, keeping my tail wrapped around Jayfeather's back, but not for guidance this time, but for support. I was actually shocked that Jayfeather didn't hiss or pull away, knowing quite well that affection wasn't his thing. "It is difficult when you find yourself in a tough situation that you didn't even ask for."

I then watched as Jayfeather sniffed, shifting his blind gaze to me. "How would you know?" He asked, his eyes narrowed.

I let out a quiet purr of amusement, looking down to the ground below. "Well, I guess I don't," I admitted shyly. "I just wanted to try and make you feel better..." *Jayfeather, of course, is always prickly and short-tempered, but never sad... I don't like it at all.* Even if some cats just saw their mentors *as* mentors primarily, I cared for Jayfeather immensely, and wanted to show him that I would be there for him if he ever needed me.

After I had spoken, I definitely didn't expect any sort of reciprocation. So, I was surprised to say the least when Jayfeather actually turned his head to touch his muzzle briefly to my cheek for a couple of heartbeats. I closed my eyes, relishing his familiar scent as I felt my stomach twist.

But, the shock I felt immediately went away as Jayfeather pulled away, and I caught sight of the island, now in clear view as we traveled across the lake.

I gasped, beginning to hop up and down once again. "Jayfeather, there it is!" I purred. "Can you see it?"

"No, I can't," Jayfeather muttered, lashing his tail. Before I could apologize to the gray tabby tom, forgetting that he was blind for just a moment, he spoke again as he shook his head. "Now stop hopping, or you'll be too tired to get to the island."

"Sorry," I muttered, nodding and beginning to pad slowly once again. It was then that I realized that I wanted to look more calm and collected, as I was entering this Gathering as a full ThunderClan medicine cat for the first time.

I can't help hopping and being so excited though, I thought, *I haven't been to a Gathering in a long time!*

I tried to hold in another squeal as I saw the fallen tree that led onto the island. I let out a huff as I realized that the makeshift bridge almost wasn't necessary at this point, considering there were just a few small puddles filling up lake, nothing more. Cats could just easily walk on the ground where the large body of water used to be.

They would have to deal with some seriously muddy paws though, I thought, sniffing.

I brushed my fur with Jayfeather's as I quickly ran across the log, wanting to start looking around the clearing as soon as possible. Just before I made it on to the island, I slipped on the tree and fell off into a muddy puddle about a fox-length down.

"Fox-dung!" I cursed as I stood up and shook my now *brown* fur.

Jayfeather seemed to be suppressing a snort of amusement as he hopped off the log and started to lick my fur. "You clumsy badger! Be more careful next time!" he said sternly, rolling his eyes. "Are you alright?"

"Yes, I'm alright!" I answered sincerely as Jayfeather licked behind my ears. "I won't let a bit of *mud* ruin tonight!"

Once I was clean enough, I thanked Jayfeather for the help before leaping back up onto the fallen tree, Jayfeather following right behind me. I stopped and waited to make sure he made the jump fully, and once he leaped back on, we continued our travel to the island.

"What happened to you?" Goldenshine meowed, doubling back from where she had been walking to pad beside me. "Decided that you wanted to look like Rainstorm tonight?"

"Very funny," I purred, rolling my eyes and lightly batting Goldenshine's ear with my paw. "I fell in a mud puddle," I then explained, my ears a little hot with embarrassment. Even though

Jayfeather had licked most of the mud off, my fur still was tinted with the brown mud and dirt, Goldenshine had so *kindly* pointed out.

Goldenshine purred with amusement. "Clumsy furball!" she meowed teasingly.

"Hey!" I exclaimed, nudging her playfully with my shoulder.

I gasped as Goldenshine then slid and then tripped on the tree. Before she could fall in a puddle in the ground she grabbed on to the log and dug her claws into the bark.

I let out a *mrrow* of laughter as I padded up to meet her. "Who's the clumsy furball now?" I purred, hoisting her back up. We both purred with amusement together as we finally leaped off of the log and onto the island.

When we finally stepped onto grass, I happened to look down to see that next to me, Goldenshine was looking quite... *plump*. I realized then how difficult it had been for me to lift her back up onto the log. There was absolutely nothing *wrong* with the way that my sister looked, but I just knew that typically, Goldenshine looked pretty lean and skinny.

"Getting extra prey from the fresh-kill pile?" I asked Goldenshine, only at a volume that she would hear.

Goldenshine's eyes widened as she then looked down at her belly. She whispered something under her breath that I couldn't hear at all and then looked back at me, her eyes still wide.

"Haha... I guess so," she said hesitantly.

I narrowed my eyes. *Why is she suddenly acting so weirdly?* I wondered to myself. *I hope it wasn't too rude of me to ask...*

Before I could say anything else to question my sister, I looked up to see that Goldenshine had started to walk quickly ahead of me. She then called back without looking at me, "I'm going to talk to cats from other Clans, Snowflight. I'll see you later!"

"Bye?" I said unsurely as I watched her go. *I wonder what's going on with her? She clearly didn't want to talk anymore.*

Overall, Goldenshine had been incredibly distant, not just now. She had luckily finished her punishment of doing apprentice duties after apparently eating prey that wasn't hers, but that seemed to have not made her feel any better, unfortunately. She seemed to shut herself off from everyone else, and every other night, she would disappear from ThunderClan camp. So, I was incredibly worried about her.

But, after I squeezed through some shrubs and looked up to see the large tree in the middle of the island, looming over every cat around it, all of my worries left me at that moment.

"Wow," I whispered to myself as I stared the tree in awe. *It becomes more spectacular every time!*

"It's amazing, isn't it?" a very familiar voice meowed behind me. I turned around and saw that it was my mother, Lilypetal, padding up towards me.

I stared at her, confused, as she approached me. *Something isn't right.*

"What's wrong?" Lilypetal asked, tilting her head, her hazel eyes glowing with concern.

I blinked and then thought for a moment. *Why is she walking alone? Where's Thornclaw?*

"How come you're not walking with Thornclaw to the Gathering like you usually do?" I meowed curiously, my stomach twisting. I was suddenly very apprehensive of her answer.

My mother's eyes widened. "Oh, goodness. You didn't know?"

"Know what?" I whispered, lashing my tail. My heart started to beat faster.

I then grew even more nervous as Lilypetal sighed. "Well... your father and I aren't really on speaking terms at the moment, to be honest..." my mother admitted, her eyes glowing with sadness. "You've been so busy with your duties as a full medicine cat, that I

haven't had much of a chance to tell you, I'm so sorry."

Oh, no! My parents are in a fight? "What?" I meowed with shock. "What happened?"

I then watched fearfully as Lilypetal shook her head. "It's a long story that we don't have time for, not with your first Gathering as a medicine cat going on!" She insisted before leaning forward and licking my ear. "Don't worry, Snowflight. Everything will be fine. Thornclaw and I may be having problems, but we don't love you and Goldenshine any less. *Please* know that."

I nodded, trying to be reassured by her words. "Of course I know that," I whispered back to my mother before licking her cheek. "And don't worry. I'll be okay."

"I know you will. You can always come and talk to me if you need to. Okay?"

I sighed, warmed by Lilypetal's kindness. "Okay," I purred, quickly nuzzling into my mother and then trotting up to walk beside Jayfeather to join him with the other medicine cats.

Although Lilypetal's words had eased my worries a little bit, I was still feeling very distressed. Up until now, I had always thought that my parents, Lilypetal and Thornclaw, were so in love and so incredibly close. So, to hear that something had managed to bring them to not talking at all made me very sad.

Apparently, so much so that Jayfeather could practically sense it through his blindness. "Something going on?" he asked with the slightest bit of concern and kindness in his voice as I flanked him.

My eyes widened with surprise once again. Of course, I knew deep down that Jayfeather had a soft side, one that I didn't see very often, but I didn't expect to see it now.

I tried to let myself be comforted by it, despite how strange it was. "Yes, as much as I hate to admit it," I murmured. As we both sat down with the other medicine cats, I sighed and layed my head on his shoulder.

"Everything okay?" he asked softly, looking down at me with concern in his blind blue eyes.

For some reason, my stomach fluttered at the new and unfamiliar tone I had heard in my former mentor's voice. "Oh, it's alright, Jayfeather. Don't worry about me," I insisted to him. *Huh, who ever thought that I would say "don't worry" to Jayfeather?* I then continued, "I'll forget about it in a few heartbeats." *At least I hope so.*

"Oh, okay," was all Jayfeather said in response, seeming to switch back to his closed-off self. I was relieved that he didn't ask anything else. It wasn't anything I wanted to talk about at all right now. Not when it was still so fresh. *And anyways, why would I want to bring up the fact that my parents are fighting to him? No way, not when he's in so much conflict with his own.*

I was suddenly pulled away from my thoughts as something interesting and quite intriguing caught my sight. I jerked my head up, thinking that I saw something strange out of the corner of my eye.

I narrowed my eyes as I noticed that Goldenshine was over by the WindClan cats. That on its own wasn't odd, rather it was the fact that she wasn't talking to very many of them, though; only one.

Why is Goldenshine talking to Breezepelt?

I then watched as the both of them quickly whipped their heads around, clearly to check if anybody was watching them, sneaking off together into a large bush.

At first, I was utterly confused, but it didn't take long for all of it, and I mean *all* of it, to snap. My head seemed to bubble up and then pound with anger. *Goldenshine has been meeting with Breezepelt! That's where she's been all of these nights! And she's pregnant with Breezepelt kits!*

Chapter 13

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

My stomach twisted with guilt as Breezepelt led me under a bush, away from all of the other unknowing cats at the Gathering.

As I looked around to check if anyone was watching, my ears turned hot when I *immediately* noticed that Snowflight was glaring right back at me. By looking at her face for only a heartbeat, I could tell that she was saying, "I know what you're up to, and I'm going to shred your fur off!"

My stomach twisted, surprised to see Snowflight so angry. *How can she possibly know, is it that obvious?* I wondered to myself. *Great StarClan, I hope not. Otherwise all four Clans will figure out what's going on, soon enough.*

I pretended like I didn't see Snowflight's blue gaze burning into my pelt as I finally ran into the bush, suddenly feeling very panicked knowing that my sister likely knew what was going on. *She wouldn't rat me out, would she?*

I crawled inside to see that Breezepelt was already in there waiting for me, and as soon as I met his amber gaze, I let out a frustrated hiss.

"Breezepelt, why did you bring me here? Firestar told us that we couldn't see each other anymore," I said with deep emotion in my meow, but rolling my eyes. "Despite that, we proceeded to meet every few nights, but after that, I told you that I hated keeping secrets, and that I couldn't do this anymore!"

It hurt to say every word that I had just said, for I was up to the brim in pain by now.

I let out a shaky sigh, reflecting on the fact that the past moon had

been quite a whirlwind. After Firestar had confronted Breezepelt and I, I had thought for *sure* that would have been the last time that we would see each other.

But, just a couple of days later, Breezepelt had caught me while I was on the dawn patrol. He had begged to me that we start meeting up again, and I found myself not being able to back away from the offer. Even though at the time we had only been apart for a bit of time, I already had missed him *immensely* - his warm scent, his gentle words, all of the fun we had had together that night, just playing like kits and talking... Even though I had been so upset with myself after being discovered by Firestar, I... I just couldn't make myself feel guilty enough to not go and see Breezepelt again.

So, from there is when we began meeting every few nights. We had so much fun together, and during all of it, I found that I had no regrets about what I was doing. I loved Breezepelt so much, and at the time, I knew that I never, ever wanted to lose him. I tried to stay focused on my warriors duties as usual, trying to prove wrong the Goldenshine that had originally said that mates interfere with it.

But, about a half-moon after that, I found out something that absolutely terrified me, and it dawned on me just how dangerous it was for us to be meeting up anymore. As hard as it had been, I had told Breezepelt that we should stop meeting, at least for a while. It was much too risky, and I didn't think that I could handle it anymore. Not when the consequences of our actions were finally creeping up on me. *And I thought that being found by the ThunderClan leader was bad...* I thought fearfully.

That had just been a couple of moonhighs ago. Clearly, Breezepelt hadn't taken it well, as he had pulled me away from the rest of the Gathering to talk to me.

After I had questioned Breezepelt as to why he had brought me under this bush, his amber eyes looked up at me, filled with sadness. "I just *had* to see you again, Goldenshine," he whispered, his eyes filled with pain and desperation. "I love you. You're all I ever think about. You just never leave my head."

"I love you too," I immediately meowed after he finished, "But this

is against the warrior code. I always knew it, but I ignored it and tried to convince myself that it would be okay, but it isn't. Breezepelt, I just don't think that this can work anymore!"

Breezepelt's eyes burned with anger and love at the same time as he listened to me. When he sat there silently, I didn't know what to say after that. At least, anything that would calm him down.

Should I tell him that I'm expecting his kits?

I sighed and tried to meet his gaze, coming to a decision. "Breezepelt, I have something to tell you-"

"Save it," he hissed before I could finish. "You obviously don't love me as much as I love you, so I'll just find someone who really cares about me. We're done."

He let out one more hiss before leaving the bush.

I let out a half-shocked, half-irritated hiss. *No! This isn't how I want things to end!* I suddenly found myself not wanting to see Breezepelt go like this. The last thing I wanted was for us to end on a sour note.

"Breezepelt, wait! Please!" I begged.

Right as his tail was sliding out of the bush, Breezepelt paused. "What?" he growled, peeking his head back in.

The only way I can break this news to him the right way is if we meet again... I decided reluctantly. "Just meet me by the ThunderClan-WindClan border tomorrow at sunset, and I'll explain everything!" I meowed desperately.

He sighed and looked back at me, his amber eyes filled with pain, still.

"Fine," he muttered before completely leaving the bush. "See you there."

When I reluctantly followed Breezepelt out of the bush, I suddenly felt a small pain in my stomach as the kits moved. After it passed, I

sighed and looked up to Silverpelt. *Oh, StarClan, what am I going to do with these little ones?* I asked them to myself. *I love them more than anything already, but... why did this have to happen now?*

I hung my head down in shame as I began to pad back to the Gathering clearing. *Why did I* let *it happen now?*

Every cat was beginning to leave once I arrived back into the crowd. I narrowed my eyes as I realized that almost everyone seemed to be meowing and whispering to each other excitedly.

Suddenly feeling very curious, and a little remorseful that I had missed the Gathering, I ran up to Dovepaw and Lionblaze, who seemed to be murmuring to each other nervously. "What happened?" I asked them, stopping about a tail-length in front of them.

Dovepaw turned her head to face me and stared at me, clearly confused. "What do you mean?" She asked, lashing her tail. "You were out here listening, weren't you?"

I froze, trying to come up with an excuse as quickly as I could. *Shoot.* "Uh... I was just in my own world, I guess," I lied. *Good enough.*

Dovepaw shrugged at my explanation.

Lionblaze explained what I had missed. "Each Clan leader is going to send out two cats of their choice to go see what is causing this drought."

"I see. Exciting!" I meowed as I nodded with intrigue. *That's interesting! I wonder who they'll pick?* I asked myself, looking down at my swelling belly. *I would have to come up with some excuse for Firestar if he were to pick me...*

As I was then beginning to walk off of the log, a *searing* pain suddenly shot through my stomach. To say the least, it felt worse than anything I had ever felt up until now. I let out a weak squeal and fell to the ground, barely being able to take the pain. Everything was spinning, and it was suddenly hard to breath. *What's*

happening? I thought in sheer panic. *StarClan, be with me, please!*

Every cat who had been walking past froze to watch me groan with pain, their eyes wide enough to pop out of their heads. Before anyone could even *say* anything, I sighed with relief as saw Snowflight shouldering her way through the crowd.

"Everyone, stand back!" she shouted, and to her luck, I'm sure, every cat around listened to her.

I could barely see as Snowflight then quickly padded up to me and bent down. "Goldenshine, you're having your kits!" she hissed quietly into my ear, rubbing my stomach with one of her paws.

I let out an almost breathless gasp. *What?* I shouted from inside, for once hoping that Snowflight was wrong. *These kits can't possibly be coming now, it's early! A half-moon early!*

I then watched as Snowflight then turned to the cats still gathered around. "Can someone help me carry her, *please*?" she asked desperately, lashing her tail towards me. "I can't by myself, and we need to get her away from here as soon as possible."

"I will."

A dark cat, one now very familiar to me, ran up to stand by Snowflight.

Breezepelt...

He and Snowflight quickly raised me off of the ground, and as I was suddenly on my paws again, I put all of my weight on their shoulders, not being able to hold myself up very well on my own.

The travel across the tree ridge felt as horrible and infinite as I'm sure the journey to the Dark Forest felt. It felt nearly impossible to put one paw in front of the other, and I might as well have had a large rock in my stomach dragging me down. Along with that, I could barely breath, so you know, it was just quite pleasant *overall.*

Breezepelt, Snowflight and I seemed to be traveling faster than I thought though as I realized that we were already arriving in the

ThunderClan forest, our pelts being covered by the dark shadows of trees.

I can't believe this is happening right now, I thought in distress as I felt Breezepelt and Snowflight trying to lay me down. *What luck!*

"Goldenshine, what's wrong?" Breezepelt asked, his voice shaking with worry. I found myself relaxing a little at the sound of my mate's voice.

"She's having kits!" Snowflight hissed quickly, glaring at the WindClan tom. "Would we have gone through the trouble of taking her all the way here if she was *dying?*"

Breezepelt just stood there with wide eyes, ignoring Snowflight's harsh words. He clearly was too shocked to say anything. *Me too, my love,* I thought as I tried to catch my breath.

Snowflight continued to glare at Breezepelt before shaking her tail in front of his bewildered face. "Don't just stand there, help me!" Snowflight shouted to him as she began to scan the area. "I came here because I knew where the herbs would be, so try and make yourself useful while I look for some!"

I managed a small purr of amusement, humored and shocked by how assertive and almost *rude* Snowflight was acting. I was impressed at how she was able to buckle down under pressure and simply do what she had to do in troubled times. *She almost turns into Jayfeather when she has to*, I joked to myself.

At Snowflight's command, Breezepelt nodded and padded up to me as the white she-cat turned away to look for herbs, I assumed. "Are you okay, Goldenshine?" Breezepelt whispered, running his tail down my flank. I closed my eyes at the gentleness of his voice.

I heard light footsteps emerging again, and I looked up to see that Snowflight was already back, a bundle of herbs in her mouth.

"She will be soon," Snowflight then meowed, putting down her herbs. "Just stay out of my way for now, and lick the kits when they come out, please." I then flinched as I felt Snowflight touch her paw

to my belly. "Here we go, Goldenshine."

Here we go.

I took a long, deep breath and began to push.

~•~•~•~•~•~•~

I had never felt more amazing in my whole life than I did looking down at my four beautiful kits. The birth had been very rough, and it had felt like a life's worth of work, but I already knew that these kits were worth a *million* lives over. In that moment, all of the choices I had made - meeting with Breezepelt in secret, breaking the warrior code, and expecting kits with a cat from another Clan - suddenly didn't matter anymore. All that mattered were the four balls of perfection suckling at my belly.

Snowflight had pointed out that there were two she-cats and two toms. One of the she-cats was a dark-gray tabby, while the other was bright orange. One of the toms was almost as small as the she-cats. He was light brown with very fluffy fur. Luckily, the other tom looked very strong, and was the largest of all the kits. He had the same exact pelt color as Breezepelt, with a white chest, belly, and paws.

"They're beautiful," Breezepelt had whispered as he lied down beside me.

"What do you mean, *they're beautiful*?" I whispered back teasingly, digging my muzzle into his soft fur. "They're absolutely perfect."

Breezepelt and I had lied there for several heartbeats, staring down lovingly at our kits, before I then heard a quiet gasp come from my sister.

"Uh, oh," Snowflight muttered, bending down to look at and sniff the kits again, almost as if to double-check something.

My heart began to beat faster.

"What? What's wrong?" Breezepelt asked, seemingly starting to panic as he stood up.

Snowflight closed her eyes and sighed after having touched her nose to each of the kits, one at a time. Although Snowflight's gaze was even, I knew her more than any cat. Something was terribly wrong.

Snowflight's suddenly solemn gaze said it all.

"I'm afraid that only one of your kits has survived," the medicine cat forced out shakily. "They were all very small and weak. Only one of your toms, the gray one, is strong enough to live."

"What?" Breezepelt meowed, his voice breaking as he spoke. "You're joking!"

Snowflight sighed, staring back at the black tom. "No cat would be cruel enough to joke about that," she whispered, putting the tip of her tail on Breezepelt's shoulder. "I am so sorry..."

I hadn't moved since Snowflight had spoken. I mean, I was *speechless*. I felt numb with the amount of grief I was feeling. Just moments ago, four kits were nestled up against me. Four potential lives. Four kits that could have become amazing warriors, medicine cats, or even leaders one day. Thank StarClan, *one* of them would still get that chance, but the pain was still too great.

I let out a loud wail of grief and layed my head on my dear kits. "My precious kits, I'm so, so sorry," I whispered to them, barely being able to speak as my throat welled up with emotion. *StarClan, are you punishing me for having them like this?* I asked my warrior ancestors in dismay. *Don't punish them, they've done nothing wrong! Punish their mother! Oh, goodness, this is all my fault!*

"And sorry you should be."

I managed to let out a startled yelp as a deeper voice suddenly growled from behind us. I immediately stood up and turned to see that it was Firestar, catching us in an act once again. My stomach twisted as I realized that the ThunderClan leader had never looked so angry, at least not since I had been alive.

I hung my head low as Firestar's furious green gaze burned into me.

"I told you two never to meet each other again, Goldenshine," he meowed sharply. "And here you are with *kits*!"

"Firestar, please!" I begged, overwhelmed with panic. "I haven't met with Breezepelt ever since you saw us together over a moon ago! I was shocked when I saw I was expecting kits!" As much as I was panic, trying to defend myself, I was suddenly overwhelmed with guilt.

Although my words weren't as far from lies as they could have been, I hated lying to my leader at all, which was what I was doing. But... I felt like I had to in order to save my place in ThunderClan.

I was utterly ashamed of myself. *How selfish are you, Goldenshine?* I asked myself angrily. *What has happened to you? Just a few moons ago you never would have dreamed of lying to Firestar.* But I already had now, and it was too late to backtrack.

"She's telling the truth!" Snowflight broke in, to my shock. I tried to suppress the purr rumbling in my throat as Snowflight padded up to stand beside me. "I go collect herbs at night, and I haven't seen her out *once*."

I sighed with relief and gave my sister a look of gratitude. *Neither of those things are actually true,* I realized, knowing that Snowflight was trying to save me from a lot more trouble. *Hopefully Firestar didn't see Breezepelt and I talking at the Gathering.*

"Believe her, Firestar!" Breezepelt demanded, running up to stand on my other side. "Goldenshine is the most amazing, loyal, and trustworthy cat in your Clan, and she deserves to be forgiven!"

My heart filled with both love and sadness at the same time as Breezepelt stood up for me. I couldn't help but press my flank up against his and rub my head against his neck. *I'm going to miss this...*

Firestar stood in silence for several heartbeats, clearly very deep in thought. He then let out a long sigh and gave a single sharp nod.

"Goldenshine, I am still disappointed in the choices that you've made... but I know that you are a great warrior, and you have done

many things to help our Clan," he meowed, hesitating ever so slightly. "So, I believe you."

Thank StarClan. "Thank you, Firestar," I said with relief. *I'm sorry I kind of had to lie to you... I'm* never *doing it again.*

"But, of course, this has to be the end of the relationship between you and Breezepelt."

I closed my eyes slowly, taking a deep breath as I realized that Firestar was right, and I was going to comply with his words without hesitation. But I had to try my hardest to push down doubt again as I heard Breezepelt gasp. "What?" Breezepelt exclaimed, glaring at the ThunderClan leader. "What about our one living kit?"

Firestar glanced down at the little gray scrap before looking back up at Breezepelt. "That is for you to decide," Firestar murmured. "Make your decision, and then return to your own Clans."

I watched in dismay as Firestar then beckoned Snowflight with his tail, and they both padded away into ThunderClan territory.

Once Firestar and Snowflight were out of sight, I instantly turned back to Breezepelt, overwhelmed with sadness. "What should we do?" I choked out, barely able to speak. *We do have to end things but... our kit. Is our kit going to have parents in two different Clans?* I screwed my eyes shut and hissed as I felt another huge pang of guilt. *Another reason why I want to bang my head against a tree right now...*

Breezepelt shook his head slowly. I could already tell he was thinking like I was.

About the situation with our kit, not about banging his head against a tree.

I watched solemnly as my mate let out a huff before letting his amber gaze fall on me. "As much as I want to take the kit, I think that you should, Goldenshine," he meowed, clearly having trouble getting the words out as he looked down at our son. "You... you have many queens to help you take care of it, and I know he would

be safe and happy with you." I then closed my eyes once again as I felt Breezepelt press his muzzle against mine. "And I don't doubt that you would be a fantastic mother."

I took a deep breath and nodded, agreeing wholeheartedly with that decision. I did feel absolutely horrible thinking that Breezepelt would never get to see his own son grow up, but I knew that if that is what he requested, that meant that I should probably just do it. *And even though Breezepelt will feel the same, I wouldn't be able to bear going back to ThunderClan and knowing that my son was over in another Clan without me,* I realized. *And... and I think I must take on the care for this kit, as a reminder of why he's here in the first place. He will remind me that his gain was because of a loss in myself.*

"Okay," I muttered to Breezepelt, letting out a weak and shaky sigh. "I will take him. He will be a ThunderClan cat." I then turned to where the three dead kits were lying, my heart breaking all over again. "S-Should we bury them?"

"That would probably be best."

I then watched sadly as Breezepelt padded over to what seemed like a good spot, and quickly dug a large hole into the ground. My heart seemed to sink lower and lower to the ground with each splatter of dirt that landed beside me. Then, one by one, Breezepelt gently put each kit into the hole he had dug. I blinked back emotion in my eyes as I then watched him very reluctantly filled in the hole with his hind paws.

Then as Breezepelt turned around, our gazes met.

"Well, I think this is goodbye," I whispered, trying incredibly hard to say what I was. *This is what needs to be done*, I told myself as me and Breezepelt twinned tails, probably for the last time. *At least, it will be the last time that I let it happen.* "We... we probably shouldn't meet again, for both of our sakes."

Breezepelt slowly nodded in agreement, his amber eyes glowing with sadness. "I know," he breathed, before pulling his tail away from mine. "I will *never* forget you, Goldenshine."

And I'll never forget you, and what I've learned from you.

I then suppressed a whimper as Breezepelt touched his muzzle to mine, then bending down to lick the one living kit that we still shared together. Then he looked back up at me, his eyes welling up with emotion.

"Goodbye, Goldenshine," he whispered.

"Goodbye, Breezepelt," I responded back, my voice continuing to crack with pain. *This is what I have to do,* I kept telling myself. *This is what I have to do.*

As much as I almost wanted to beg for the WindClan tom to stay, I stood in my place as Breezepelt then turned around, beginning to pad back in the direction of his territory. The last that I saw of him was his tail disappearing through some brambles.

Goodbye, Breezepelt.

I spent several heartbeats staring at the place where he had disappeared before picking up my kit and reluctantly walking back deeper into ThunderClan territory, wondering how in the name of StarClan I would be able to explain myself.

Chapter 14

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

I was drowning in my own thoughts as I traveled back to camp after the Gathering. I mean, I couldn't even believe what had just happened.

Goldenshine was pregnant with Breezepelt's kits! That's where she's been all of these nights! I realized, finding myself extremely angry with Goldenshine and extremely *worried* about her at the same time. I knew that once we got closer to ThunderClan territory, I would need to look for her and make sure that her kitting had gone well.

No cat had explicitly told me, but I knew that was what was going on. I recognized the specific winces of pain, and that certain type of helplessness that glowed in my daughter's eyes.

My daughter, having kits. I feel like I just had her! I thought, my eyes widening. *I wish that her kitting could have been a more exciting and happier event than it is...*

I growled, almost as if to release my frustration of the situation, and shook my head as Brambleclaw suddenly came into my sight.

"Hey, Lilypetal!" he meowed kindly, falling into step with me. "Do you want to talk now, or should I come to you later?"

I flashed the ThunderClan deputy a look of gratitude. I appreciated that he knew that I was, you know, *upset* and probably extremely preoccupied in my own thoughts. Nevertheless, I looked up and smiled at the dark brown tabby tom. Plus, I knew what he was probably coming to talk to me about, and I figured, why not stack more news onto what had already happened?

"Now is okay, Brambleclaw," I tried to meow cheerfully. "What is it?"

Brambleclaw hesitated for a few heartbeats before speaking. "I just wanted to tell you, I talked to Thornclaw," he explained, but his voice had a hint of regret and remorse to it.

Oh, dear... "And?" I said, sighing. Unfortunately, I thought I already had a pretty good idea of what the deputy was going to say.

"He wouldn't budge," Brambleclaw admitted, looking into my eyes. "I'm so sorry, Lilypetal. Do you want me to try again?"

I shook my head. I was pretty much giving up hope at this point. If another cat can't even get through to him, then why should *I* try again? I was absolutely bewildered by my former mate's behavior, remembering all over again that communication was so important to the both of us. I was still tempted to approach the golden tabby tom myself, but, of course, I knew that communication takes *two*.

"I hate to admit that you'd probably just be wasting your time, Brambleclaw," I murmured sadly, briefly licking his shoulder. "Thank you so, so much for trying, though. Really."

Brambleclaw dipped his head before giving me one more sympathetic look and trotting ahead to walk beside Firestar.

I sighed with sorrow and exasperation, coming to terms with my situation, and then continued to slowly walk toward camp with my head lowered. *Well, it was fun while it lasted, right?* I tried to tell myself. *I'm going to be sad for a little while, but every wound heals...*

Then, my ears flicked as I came to a realization. *Wait, why am I being so depressed about my own life?* I shook my head quickly and started to run, full speed, deeper into the forest. *Goldenshine is having kits and I didn't even go to see her immediately! What am I thinking?* I suppose that through the shock of the situation, I hadn't been thinking straight.

I started to follow her scent, also mingled with Snowflight's and Breezepelt's, through the forest. It smelled deeply of milk and fear scent. Just as I recognized that the group's scent was becoming stronger and stronger, another scent flooded through my nose.

Something smelled strange, and unfortunately, I knew exactly what it was. *Death*, I thought grimly, *no, no, no...*

As I gaped my mouth open to fully take in the scent, I realized the scent of death was also mixed with the smell of kits.

I shook my head quickly, gasping. "This can't be happening! No!" I held back a whimper and began to look for my daughter. I didn't even know for sure what had happened, but my heart was already breaking for her, whatever it was.

"Goldenshine! Goldenshine!" I yelled out, now desperate to find her and see what was going on.

I stopped in my tracks again as I suddenly heard a sniff come from behind a bush that I already passed, and once I had stopped, I heard a whimper that followed.

I pricked my ears, trying to listen for more. "Hello?" I muttered, whipping my head around. "Anyone there?"

"Lilypetal?"

I gasped as I heard the very familiar whisper, and all of the sudden, Goldenshine's ginger head popped up from the top of the bush.

Oh, my love. I'm so sorry I didn't come sooner. "Goldenshine!" I nearly shouted. I practically flew over the bushes and then pressed my muzzle against her head. "Goldenshine, I'm so sorry!" I repeated out loud. "Are you okay?"

Goldenshine let out a loud wail and let herself fall to the ground. "They're gone, mother!" She wailed. "All are dead except for one!"

No! My mouth dropped open as my gaze then fell down to a small and dark little bundle that was finding its way to Goldenshine's belly. *This is the only one that survived?*

I then took a deep breath, knowing that falling into hysterics in front of Goldenshine was exactly what I *shouldn't* be doing. I took a deep breath and nodded slowly as I observed my daughter's son. The first thing that I thought was that I wasn't surprised that it had

lived. It was large for a kit, and it looked very strong and healthy. I sighed and bent down to lick the kit's head.

I then raised my head, meeting Goldenshine's gray-black gaze, my heart sinking as my own feelings reflected the sorrow in her eyes.

"Goldenshine, why did you hide all of this from me?" I asked my daughter, swallowing back emotion. "I could have helped you through all of this."

Goldenshine looked down at her kit. "I... I was worried that you wouldn't trust me again, that you would be angry at me..."

I tried to hold back my then rising anger, but I knew now was not the right time to take out anything on Goldenshine. *What is with all of the secrets*? I sighed and shook my head. *I'm over-analyzing all of it. Clearly my family has a lot of things that they're just very ashamed of...*

I stared down at my daughter softly. "I understand," I then murmured, looking at the small kit nestled on Goldenshine's belly. *She'll be a good mother*, I thought.

"Lilypetal," Goldenshine suddenly whispered, "What am I going to tell the rest of the Clan? Firestar was already cross with me, and now everyone knows now that I've broken the warrior code!" She tucked her head in between her paws, clearly incredibly stressed. For the moment, I had no idea what to tell her. Part of me was still completely bewildered that the sight in front of me wasn't just a horrible joke my mind was forming.

I mean, this wasn't like Goldenshine at all, and I almost wished I had found out about her infidelities in small portions. Hearing about the fact that she had met with a WindClan warrior in secret, continued to meet him, and had kits with him, made me tempted to think that it was all fake, that it wasn't true. I had only ever known Goldenshine to be dedicated to her Clan, wanting to be the best warrior that she could be, whatever that took.

Well... I suppose that love can make you do crazy things... I thought, briefly looking back at Leafpool and the choices she had made, even

despite being ThunderClan's medicine cat.

"Don't worry, Goldenshine. I'll be right here beside you."

I nearly flinched as I suddenly heart a deeper voice echo out into the forest.

Goldenshine's eyes widened. "Father?" she exclaimed.

This time, I actually did flinch. *Great StarClan, Thornclaw is here?* I turned around reluctantly to see it was indeed Thornclaw slithering through the bushes. I let my gaze fall to the ground as he approached. And luckily, he ignored me right back and stared straight at Goldenshine, and she stared back at him, her eyes still wide.

"What are you doing here?" she asked. "Where is the rest of ThunderClan?" I then watched as my daughter flitted her gaze around fearfully, I assumed trying to catch sight of her Clan traveling through the shadows.

"ThunderClan is coming this way," he informed us, padding up to stand next to Goldenshine and touching his muzzle to her head. "Take a deep breath, Goldenshine. Everything will be okay, I promise."

As I watched the both of them, and the amount of warmth that Thornclaw gave his daughter suddenly gave me a pang of longing. *I miss when Thornclaw was gentle like that with me... but that is long over.*

Goldenshine nodded up to her father before standing up and picking up her son to carry in her jaws. As I began to hear a crowd's amount of voices heading our way, I backed up to stand by Goldenshine. I then licked her head, and put the tip of my tail on her shoulder. Thornclaw was still flanking her on her other side.

I hope that she always knows that both of us will always be here to support her, I thought, *whether we're in a quarrel or not. The fact that we are parents to her has not changed.*

After a few heartbeats of us waiting, listening to the sounds of

several pawsteps getting closer, ThunderClan approached in our sight. For a moment, I thought that maybe they wouldn't even notice the three of us standing before them. But, to my dismay, nearly every cat's eyes immediately flew down to the kit in Goldenshine's mouth.

Everyone was silent for a moment.

Brambleclaw was the first to eventually speak. "Hm, you better have a logical explanation for this," the dark brown tabby tom murmured to Goldenshine, his amber eyes not leaving the kit.

Goldenshine took a few steps back, clearly intimidated. She didn't respond to Brambleclaw's subtle interrogation.

I then rolled my eyes as Spiderleg pushed his way through to the front of the crowd. "Who's the father? *Breezepelt*?" He hissed.

Firestar glared at Spiderleg and raised his tail in front of him to silence the nosey tom. But I didn't know how that would help them situation. Even though the ThunderClan leader had managed to silence one cat, that didn't give the opportunity for Goldenshine to not give an answer. I glanced over at her to see that she looked completely lost for words. I tried to get my brain working in order to come up with a likely scenario.

"No. They're ours."

My eyes widened as a voice suddenly came from the back of the crowd, and I peered over and saw that it was Mousewhisker that had spoken. He lightly shouldered his way to stand at the front of the ThunderClan group. I looked over at Goldenshine, bewildered, to see that her face was filled with relief.

At first, I wondered why Mousewhisker had even considered speaking out like that at all, before remembering that ever since Mousewhisker was a young warrior and Goldenshine was an apprentice, they had been very good friends. They often went on hunting patrols and ate their fresh-kill together. Sometimes at night in the warriors den, cats would have to hiss at them to go to sleep with their loud whispering. The more that I thought about it, the

more that I realized that it wasn't a surprise to me at *all* that Mousewhisker would do something like this for Goldenshine.

Goldenshine didn't seem surprised either, and simply looked back at Mousewhisker with gratitude and affection in her eyes. "Yes," she choked out. "Mousewhisker is right. This is our kit." She seemed relieved to have a believable lie to tell.

"Then how do you explain Breezepelt being the one to approach you first and carry you off before your kitting?" a voice shouted. I was tempted to shout out at them and tell them to shut up. *Are you questioning Mousewhisker's and Goldenshine's words? Sure, they're lies, but you don't know that.*

"We're good friends," Goldenshine answered evenly, nodding to Berrynose in the crowd. "We've talked at Gatherings a couple of times. And tonight, he happened to be near me when I collapsed, and he wanted to make sure that I was alright, that's all."

When the Clan did not say anymore, clearly trying to process the situation, Mousewhisker hesitantly padded up to Goldenshine and then briefly touched his muzzle to hers.

"Thank you," I heard her whisper to him as he pulled away.

"Anytime," Mousewhisker whispered back to her, his eyes full of sympathy as he wrapped his tail around her back.

"Makes sense to me," I heard Graystripe meow after a few heartbeats. To my relief, then more cats began to murmur and nod in agreement. Goldenshine sighed once more as the whole Clan began to travel through the forest again, clearly brushing off the situation. *Thank StarClan.*

I joined the others slowly, still overwhelmed about everything that had just happened, and me delving into my thoughts once again caused me fall to the back of the group. I recognized Thornclaw's golden pelt traveling just a few tail-lengths ahead of me.

I found myself walking a little faster. *Should I talk to him?* I wondered, beginning to become nervous at the prospect of speaking

with him again. *We may not be mates anymore, but this consensus of silence can't go on forever.*

Trying not to overthink things, I took a deep breath and trotted up to walk beside Thornclaw.

As my eyes fell on him, I almost wanted to then run away without a word. And I almost did. But, I composed myself and finally spoke. "Hey," I said quietly, looking down at the ground.

"Hi," he murmured, not even trying to meet my gaze.

I then decided to try and talk further, realizing that things couldn't be any worse at this point. What did I have to lose?

"Listen," I started hesitantly, "It was amazing what you did for Goldenshine just now. She'll remember that kind of support for the rest of her life."

Thornclaw looked down as he walked, I guess the ground being more fascinating than a cat's face. "Sure," he murmured before actually looking up at me. "Well, for one, I felt badly that cats she was supposedly *close* to couldn't bother to trust her."

Oh, StarClan. Not this again. "Thornclaw-" I meowed, attempting to try and explain myself.

Thornclaw broke his gaze... and my words. "Lilypetal, I just can't talk right now, I'm sorry." I then watched as my former mate turned away and padded ahead of me.

I shook my head and let out a long and quiet sigh. *Thornclaw has always been stubborn. The only time I've seen him like this beyond now was when we first met, when he hated the fact that Firestar had let another kittypet join the Clan. But after that, he was so kind, so funny, and so gentle.*

I could understand to some extent as to why he was upset with me over this stupid Dark Forest situation, but couldn't he at least try to see where I was coming from? If he had been training in the Dark Forest and felt *remorse* for it, I maybe would have handled things differently. But the fact that he had only lashed out at me for

thinking that training in the Dark Forest was bad... wasn't, well... *good*.

Trying to forget what had just happened, I trotted up to Squirrelflight to start talking with her. We luckily were able to get into a lighthearted conversation about Clan gossip. As we approached the gorse tunnel that led into camp, I turned my head slightly back, suddenly receiving that strange, intuitional feeling of being watched. And sure enough, glancing a little to the right, I saw that Thornclaw was hanging in the back of the crowd, staring straight back at me.

His eyes were gleaming and filled with sorrow, pain, and love.

Chapter 15

[image]

Snowflight's POV

I didn't even know how I felt about this entire situation. Of course, I was *incredibly* frustrated with Goldenshine, my own sister, for breaking the warrior code in the way that she did, and having *kits* with Breezepelt of WindClan.

But, I couldn't help also feeling extreme twinges of excitement. I mean, I had helped to deliver kits, *without* Jayfeather's help! Up until now, I had helped my mentor with many deliveries, but this was the first one I had done entirely by myself. No direction, no advice from another cat... I just had to go off of my own memory.

Unfortunately, I was also heartbroken that this first delivery had resulted in three out of the four of Goldenshine's kits not making it. But... sometimes there are problems and wounds that medicine cats can't even heal, I tried to reassure myself as I walked on my own back to camp.

I then paused, catching sight of a borage bush just a couple of tail-lengths away. I let out a small huff of satisfaction as I padded over, deciding to collect some. I then nearly flinched as I noticed that Jayfeather was suddenly approaching from behind me. I looked up and met his gaze to see that his blind eyes were glowing with admiration.

"Hey!" I purred, lifting up some of the herbs I was collecting to Jayfeather's nose. "Borage!"

As I then turned back to the bush to collect more herbs, I felt Jayfeather lightly touch his tail to my flank."I am very proud of you, Snowflight," Jayfeather murmured.

I flicked my ears, shocked, thinking that Jayfeather had never sounded so... *happy*.

I must have really impressed him! I realized excitedly. Of course, he hadn't been able to look at me when he had spoken, though. He could never show *too* much joy, to my dismay!

"Thanks, Jayfeather," I then responded, nudging him on the shoulder. "But it wasn't all me, you know. I couldn't have done it without you teaching me in the first place!"

Jayfeather lifted his head up with clear pride. "Heh, then I'm not surprised you did so well," he meowed with a hint of teasing in his voice.

"Oh, whatever, you gloating mouse-brain!"

I let out a *mrrow* of laughter before picking up my new bundle of herbs. Then Jayfeather and I continued to travel to camp together in silence, side by side. As we got closer, I realized that I was beginning to be able to hear faint sounds of whimpers and high-pitched meows.

Oh, dear. I think I know who that is.

I looked at Jayfeather with concern in my eyes, lightly touching my nose to his ear to get my former mentor's attention. Jayfeather immediately shifted his head, giving me an inquiring look. "Hm?" He murmured simply.

I kept shooting quick glances in the direction of camp anxiously. "Jayfeather, I think I need to-"

Even though I hadn't given him any details, Jayfeather already seemed to know what my intentions were. He began to push me forward with his tail gently. "Go on, Snowflight," he meowed. "Be with your sister. I'll see you in the medicine den in a little while."

I couldn't suppress a purr that had begun to rumble in my throat, and I then found myself briefly nestling my head into Jayfeather's neck fur. "Thank you," I whispered. "Are you sure that you don't need help getting back to camp?"

Then, two shocking things happened. Firstly, Jayfeather didn't pull away from my muzzle digging into his fur. In fact, he somewhat

pressed back. Secondly, letting out a snort, he then meowed. "Oh, please, Snowflight. I don't need help."

I stared at the gray tabby, confused, for a couple of heartbeats. And just as I was about to question him, he finally pulled away and nodded in the direction of camp. "Now go," he muttered. "Goldenshine will want you back with her."

I shook my head quickly before finally running ahead of Jayfeather and pelting towards camp. As I ran, I finally got a few moments to think. *If Jayfeather doesn't need help finding his way through the forest because of his blindness, then why for the past few moons have I done it, and he hasn't refused?* He had never asked me to, not even *once*. But still...

And I knew that Jayfeather was headstrong, never letting other cats believe that his blindness was any sort of impediment. So, to say the least, I was baffled.

But, I knew that I had to shake it off for the time being as I burst through the camp entrance, and saw Goldenshine in the middle of camp, whimpering to herself. No other cat was around her.

I quickly ran up to meet her, wrapping my tail around her back. "Goldenshine, are you alright?"

Her head snapped up to look at me, her dark eyes full of distress. "Does it look like I'm okay, Snowflight?" She then let out a wail and then dug her head into her paws. Her kit was snuggled in her belly, suckling. "Great StarClan, what have I done? What was I thinking?"

I touched my nose to my sister's cheek. "You've made a mistake," I whispered to her. "Every cat can make mistakes."

I watched as Goldenshine just shook her head slowly. "I don't know how I'll ever be able to live the rest of my life with this mistake hanging on my shoulders," she murmured, looking down at her son. "As blessed as I am to have this kit... sometimes I wish that I could undo all of this. What do I do?"

"You move on," I answered to Goldenshine without hesitation.

"Listen... I know that mistakes, and realizing your mistakes is hard to deal with initially, but lots of cats find that it is hard for them to find a choice that they would truly want to undo. Your mistakes form who you are" I then gave Goldenshine a light nudge. "And most of the time, those mistakes even bring a bit of light later on." I then nodded to the little kit that continued to squirm at her belly.

"You wise little medicine cat, you," Goldenshine teased, touching her nose to mine. "Thanks, Snowflight." I then watched as my sister bent down began to lick her kit very gently. "You're right," she then murmured. "This is quite the light in this dark situation, isn't it?"

"Definitely," I whispered, staring down at the very strong-looking kit. "What are you going to name the little scrap?"

Goldenshine observed the kit for a few heartbeats, her eyes narrowed as she pondered the question.

"I was thinking maybe Swiftkit," she finally meowed, giving one definitive nod. "He has a bright future ahead of him, and he will run swiftly through his journey as a warrior."

I nodded, not being able to suppress a purr. "I like it," I meowed happily to my sister, putting the tip of my tail on her shoulder.

I then tilted my head as I noticed that Goldenshine was peering past me. "Whatcha got, there?" She asked, nodding to something behind me. I whipped my head around curiously and saw that Goldenshine had been referring to the borage I had just collected.

I let out a purr of amusement. "Great StarClan, what a coincidence!" I exclaimed, standing up and padding over to pick up my herbs. "Would you like me to give you some of this borage?" I asked Goldenshine, beginning to pad over to the medicine den. "If you want to keep that kit strong, he needs some milk!"

Goldenshine let out a small purr of amusement as I had. "Sure."

"Come with me," I meowed, beckoning her to follow.

Goldenshine stood up, picked up her kit, and followed me into the medicine den.

As soon as I entered the den, I dropped down the new bunch I had collected, then picking up some of it that I could give to Goldenshine. As the golden tabby she-cat settled down just behind me, I turned around and spread out a couple of the leaves in front of her.

"Just munch on those," I commanded her, nodding to the herbs. "And once you're done with that, get some *rest*! It's been an exhausting day for you!"

"Gotcha," Goldenshine murmured before licking up the leaves. I sniffed as I watched her swallow reluctantly. "Gross," she muttered.

"I'd love to here you say that once you have no milk to give to your kit!" I teased. Goldenshine then rolled her eyes, and began to walk out of the medicine den as I began to fix up the herbs I had just messed with.

But before she was completely gone, I just barely saw her turn back to me out of the corner of my eye. "Snowflight?"

"Yeah?" I asked, turning away from my work.

"Thank you," she whispered. "I don't know what I would do without you."

I nodded to her and looked at my sister warmly. "What are sisters for?" I said to her. "And, well, medicine cats, I suppose."

Goldenshine returned the warm look before proceeding to walk over in the direction of the nursery for the first time.

After that, I had just spent a few moments organizing herbs before I suddenly heard many meows and murmurs getting closer and closer to the camp.

ThunderClan must be finally getting back! I realized.

I still continued to rearrange the herbs, deep in concentration, as I heard who I assumed to be Jayfeather crawl into the den.

"Hey, Snowflight," he whispered, walking over to sit by me.

"Hey! Did anything interesting happen while I was gone?" I asked, turning to look at my former mentor.

Jayfeather shook his head. "Nope," he answered. "Most cats were just talking about the situation with the drought, and the journey that the leaders are going to send some warriors on."

My ears flicked up as I began to recall what had gone on at the Gathering. "Oh, right!" I exclaimed. It finally had come back to me that each of the four Clans was going to have to choose two cats to send out of Clan territory to find where this drought was coming from. I was already anxious to know what they were going to discover once they left. "Who do you think Firestar will send?"

Jayfeather thought for a few heartbeats, and then shrugged. "Definitely stronger warriors, I can say that for sure. I'm not sure which specific cats, though. Luckily Firestar has many good options."

I nodded in agreement. "Thanks to us, they'll be able to become even stronger!" I purred as Jayfeather then began to help me with the herbs I had been messing with just a moment ago.

After more and more time passed, for whatever reason, it seemed that the two of us were sitting closer and closer together. I had barely realized that it had been happening for quite a while, but honestly... I had no reason to complain. I could also see out of the corner of my eye that Jayfeather was looking straight at me as if he could see. I pretended to not notice as my stomach began to flutter, wondering what could possibly be going on.

Am I doing something wrong? I wondered to myself, suddenly becoming very nervous. *That's always the first thing that comes to mind when Jayfeather stares at me like that...*

I took a deep breath and turned to face him.

"Hey, is everything okay?" I asked Jayfeather, concern filling my blue eyes.

I watched as Jayfeather then shook his head as if he had been in a

daze. After a few heartbeats, he answered, "No, no, everything's absolutely fine."

I tilted my head and still faced him. "Are you sure?" I pressed, not sensing complete sincerity in the tom's meow. "Was I doing something wrong? Are you okay?"

Jayfeather shook his head again. "No, no... yes, I'm fine. You're... everything was perfect."

I blinked at him and still kept my head tilted. I wasn't convinced of anything Jayfeather was saying. *Is the world ending?* I couldn't help but joke to myself. *Jayfeather never stammers.*

Before I could ask anything else, Jayfeather then yawned and stretched himself out. "How about let's call it a day, Snowflight?" he asked me, now speaking in his normal, even voice once again. "It's getting late, and if I stay up any later, I'm going to be thinking more irrationally than I already am."

How is he thinking irrationally? I wondered. "Okay," I responded to him, trying not to over-analyze things as I walked over to my nest. I walked in a circle a few times and then lied down, already feeling like I was half asleep from how tired I was.

"Goodnight," I whispered to Jayfeather, letting out a large yawn as I spoke.

"Goodnight," he responded back, lowering his head.

After that, I almost immediately closed my eyes and was able to drift off into sleep.

~•~•~•~•~•~•~

My eyes suddenly snapped open as I heard a small screech. I whipped my head over to the den entrance to see that it was close to dawn, but no cat was awake yet. Not even Brambleclaw, who was usually the first up, ready to organize the patrols of the day.

When I heard another whimper, I turned my head back to see that poor Jayfeather was twitching in his sleep.

Bad dream, I assumed, lowering my head back down into my nest. *I won't disturb him.*

I was lying there awake for a little while, when all of the sudden, Jayfeather's blind eyes shot open and he quickly stood up from his nest. He looked around from side to side frantically as if he could see.

"Snowflight, Snowflight, where are you?" He exclaimed, his tail twitching anxiously.

To be honest, I was bewildered as I watched Jayfeather. It was a rare occurrence to see him scared, but to some extent, I had to admit that I quite enjoyed it.

Trying not to let out a loud purr of amusement, I stood up in my nest. "I'm right here, Jayfeather!" I whispered, walking over to the gray tabby tom to lightly touch him on the shoulder with my tail.

He turned around to face me and then sighed with relief. "Thank StarClan!"

"Why did you need confirmation of that?" I teased to him. When he didn't answer, I pressed more and asked, "What's wrong, Jayfeather? You can tell me."

He shook his head as he lowered it to the ground. "Nothing. Just forget it," he muttered, rolling his eyes. "Well, now I'm wide awake. I'm going to finish off what we started at moonhigh."

I tilted my head again as Jayfeather then walked over to the herbs we had been fixing the night before, and he continued to organize them. As I watched him, I noticed that some of the herb stocks were a little low.

I should probably go out and look for some more, I thought, looking back towards the den entrance. *I might as well. I don't think I can fall back asleep now.*

Figuring that Jayfeather would know what I was doing, I began to pad out of the den without a single word, but Jayfeather's ears flicked and he quickly turned to face me as I had turned around.

"Wait, where are you going?" he asked, sounding worried.

What is with him? I wondered, *All of the sudden he's so protective. Maybe he's like this all of the time, but he hides it?*

I shook my head quickly. *I don't know... I'm so confused.* "I'm just going out to get some herbs," I explained to him. "Why?"

"Let me come with you!" he suddenly insisted, running up to me.

"Okay, that's fine!" I meowed, trying not to question him anymore, as hard as it was. Then, me and Jayfeather quietly began to walk out of camp and into the forest.

As we traveled, I lightly flanked the gray tabby tom. At this point, I knew that he truly could travel around himself, but I figured that in his hysterics that I might as well help out a little bit. As we began to dodge trees and hop over rots, getting deeper into the forest, the latest happenings in my life began to sink in and process.

Sure, Jayfeather and I had gone out *many* times before to go searching for herbs together, of course, but I had never seen him so desperate to come along with me before. I seriously wondered why. *Should I ask him about it?*

As the lake ahead suddenly fell into y sight, I stopped in my tracks and put my tail in front of Jayfeather to stop him from walking as well, and then I turned to face him and his captivating blue gaze.

"What is it?" he asked, looking around again as if he could see.

"Nothing, Jayfeather!" I promised to him. After hesitating for a few heartbeats, I then decided to bring up my worries "I just wanted to ask... how come all of the sudden you're being so protective of me this morning?" I questioned. "It seems like if I weren't to be close to you, you'd panic! Is there a reason why?"

Jayfeather looked down at the ground and sighed. He hesitated for a few heartbeats and then finally answered, "It's nothing, really. I guess I'm just worried about losing my apprentice!"

I nodded. *I guess that makes sense... but why so much now? I just*

wonder why he's suddenly so visibly *worried about losing his apprentice*, I asked myself. *Even if he is just worried about that, why is he acting as protective as a mother would be to her kits, or a tom to his mate...?*

This thought gave me butterflies as we continued to walk through the forest again. Overwhelmed with so many speculations and thoughts, I tried to push them away and focus on what I had left camp to do - find herbs. *I am a medicine cat after all*, I pressed into my own mind as I began to picture scenarios that I knew couldn't be possible as more speculations rose in my head. *I am a medicine cat. Nothing more, nothing less.*

Luckily, out of the corner of my eye, I saw some juniper berries on a bush, bringing me to focus. I hopped up in excitement and ran to the bush. Jayfeather followed closely behind. And, as we began to pick the berries, I could barely see Jayfeather's head turning to me again. So, I turned to look at him.

Once I had, I found I couldn't look away from his deep blue gaze. "What?" I couldn't help but ask him.

Jayfeather sighed, but his blind gaze still didn't leave mine, and he *still* wouldn't speak.

I couldn't bear the confusion anymore. So, I let out a huff and stood up. "Look, Jayfeather," I began sharply. "I may be a medicine cat that recognizes *physical* problems, but I also have enough sense to see that something is wrong on the inside too." I took a deep breath, trying to calm down as I sat back down. "And when I say that, I don't mean infection."

I couldn't help but take a step back as Jayfeather then let out a hiss. "So what if there is something wrong?" He growled, seeming to snap back to his old self after acting weirdly all morning. "That doesn't mean that I have to tell you."

I sighed, shaking my head slowly. "Well.. I guess not," I admitted, before taking a step closer to Jayfeather again. "But that doesn't change the fact that I'm worried about you." I then began to swish my tail slowly against the ground. "It's not like fretting over me is something you do on a daily basis."

"Oh, so this is just about you, huh?" Jayfeather hissed, standing up.

"No! That's not it at all," I insisted, shocked by Jayfeather's defensiveness. "I'm just saying, it was different from how you usually act."

Jayfeather hesitated before rolling his blue eyes. "I don't know what you're going on about, because I'm fine now."

"I can tell," I muttered, narrowing my eyes.

I then watched as Jayfeather began to pace. "I mean, you're right, why would I fuss over you, anyway? Honestly, I was probably just tired out of my mind and wasn't thinking straight."

"Why do you have to rationalize this?" I asked, growing frustrated. "Even if you weren't delirious from a lack of sleep, why is it so awful for you to worry about your apprentice?"

Jayfeather whipped his head around to me, his eyes blaring with anger. "Because that's exactly what you are," he growled back to me. "You're my apprentice, nothing more. I only had to take you in because Firestar insisted that you had such a passion for healing rather than training as a warrior, even though I knew that any apprentice I would take on would be a nuisance."

I suddenly found myself feeling extremely hurt by my former mentor's words. I tried not to let my extreme sensitivity get the best of me, but I failed, letting out a quiet whimper and hanging my head low to the ground. I couldn't bear to look up at Jayfeather anymore, not after what he had just said to me. *What did I even do?* I wondered in complete dismay. *All I did was ask him what was wrong, and then he tells me that I'm a nuisance?*

"Well, I'm sorry that I'm such a *nuisance* to you," I croaked, standing up and beginning to pad away. Too overwhelmed with emotion, I found myself sitting back down almost immediately just a little further away. "Sure, I'm your apprentice. But has the word *friend* ever come to mind, or anything *similar* to that? Apparently not..."

When Jayfeather stayed silent behind me, I stood up, forcing out

my next words as I began to pad away once again. "I see where I'm not wanted. I'm going-"

I cut myself off when suddenly I heard fast pawsteps approaching me through the darkness. And the next thing I knew, Jayfeather's scent flooded through my nose, and I felt a muzzle press itself against my cheek and a flank against mine.

Sure enough, I was shocked to see that it was Jayfeather, indeed - his muzzle and his flank pressed up against me. For a few moments, I just sat where I was, completely confused.

But I certainly wasn't going to pull away.

Finally, Jayfeather spoke, the last words he had said being when he had *insulted* me.

"Snowflight, wait. Please," he meowed. "I'm sorry."

As much as I didn't want to, I forced myself to pull away from Jayfeather's touch to face him. "What do you mean, you're sorry? You're right," I hissed bitterly to the gray tabby. "I am your apprentice - nothing but a waste of space for you. You treating me like this shouldn't be a surprise to me."

I then watched as Jayfeather took a deep breath. "Snowflight," he whispered. "It's because you're *not* a waste of space that I'm treating you like this."

I shut my eyes as Jayfeather then took a step closer to me, his scent flooding through my nose. "And how is that supposed to make any sense?" I pressed, meeting his blind gaze. "You just told me that I was."

"Well, do you think I would want you knowing that that's not how I feel at all?" Jayfeather meowed, stepping even closer to me.

My heart was *pounding*. Pounding like it never had before. I shook my head slowly, trying to process everything. "How you feel?" I asked, growing frustrated all over again. "Since when have you had to hide how you feel so... *brutally?*"

"Because I shouldn't feel how I feel!" Jayfeather growled, lashing his tail irritably.

"Why not?"

"Because a medicine cat having feelings for his apprentice isn't exactly encouraged in the warrior code, is it?"

Oh my StarClan.

I almost felt as if a large bird had flown up to me and given me one large peck to the head. I suddenly felt lightheaded, and there seemed to be nothing inside but fog. I mean, it was too outrageous to be true. *It's... too good to be true...*

I shook my head slowly as I stared back at Jayfeather. "You're joking," I whispered, almost sure that I had just been imagining this whole scenario in my head. "You *have* to be joking."

Jayfeather let his head hang to the groud. "I'm not joking, Snowflight," he breathed. "If this was a joke, many moons sure is a long time to be carrying on a joke."

No. Way. I tried to push down my extreme happiness and excitement as much as I could, my stomach filling up with butterflies. "You..." I breathed. "But why me?"

"Why *not* you?" Jayfeather hissed, beginning to pace once again. "Snowflight, you're kind, intelligent, gentle, diligent... I think about you more than I should. *Way* more than I should. Sure, you were my apprentice, but my head just *had* to go beyond that, didn't it? I-"

Jayfeather then cut himself off as I took another step close to him and pressed my muzzle against his, and I put one of my paws over his paw. "Well, both of our heads were going to crazy places, then," I purred, running my tail along Jayfeather's flank. I then let my eyes close again as Jayfeather pressed back, then licking my cheek. The two of us then spent many moments in that clearing, purring as we drank in each other's scents, and our fur pressed close together.

This feels like a dream, I thought. *And I never want to wake up.* In that moment, I was completely free of any guilt that I should feel. I

didn't care that Jayfeather and I were both medicine cats, and that the two of us becoming any more than friends was completely against the warrior code. Right now, all I wanted to do was enjoy that fact that Jayfeather had confessed his feelings for me, and I returned them in the exact same way.

After several heartbeats, my ears flicked as Jayfeather finally spoke again. "Snowflight?"

"Hm?" I murmured, pulling away from the gray tabby tom's fur to look into his eyes.

I then couldn't suppress a shiver down my spine as I looked into Jayfeather's deep, intense gaze. "Snowflight, I just want you to know that..." he paused for a moment, and then continued, "I figure that you understand by now how much that you mean to me. I... I will always be here for you."

I tried to hold back another loud purr as toughly as I could. But, I watched with concern as Jayfeather's eyes briefly flashed with sadness, so quickly that I questioned if I had even seen it in the first place. Before I could ask him what was the matter, Jayfeather went on, "And *please*... whenever you feel you are in danger, just come to me and tell me right away. Okay?"

For a moment, I didn't say anything and just blinked at my former mentor. I mean, this just topped off everything that he had spoken already. Jayfeather had never, ever, said anything like this before. Not anything even *close* to it. Just last night, we had been talking and going about life as two medicine cats - talking about the Gathering and organizing herbs. Now, things had risen to an entirely new level. All of the sudden, Jayfeather was telling me that he would always be there for me, telling me to come to him if I was in *danger*.

Ever since I had become a medicine cat, I didn't expect any tom or *any* cat in the Clan to say that to me. Of all the cats that could've possibly said those words, it was Jayfeather, my *mentor*. This cranky, closed-off tom that I thought didn't look at me as nothing more than a cat he'd trained and found tolerable enough to share a den with.

I didn't want to complain one bit, though. Not at all.

"Jayfeather, I..." I breathed, looking down at the ground shyly. "I don't know what to say..." I was suddenly overwhelmed with something I had never quite felt before, and I couldn't explain it at all.

Jayfeather looked back at me as if he could see, his eyes glittering in the dawn light. "I guess there's not much to say," he whispered, licking my cheek before padding back to the juniper berry bush we had started on earlier. "Come on, let's collect these herbs and then get back to camp. We've been gone for a while, and I don't want any cat getting suspicious."

"Agreed," I breathed as I padded over to join Jayfeather. As I began to pick some berries, I shook my head, still so amazingly confused about my latest life occurrences.

What are we going to do? I wondered, glancing briefly over at Jayfeather next to me. *Pretend like this never happened? Try and hide this from every cat in ThunderClan? Oh, StarClan, help me!*

Suddenly seeking more reassurance and comfort, I sighed and dug my head into Jayfeather's neck fur. And, once I felt his muzzle press on my head and heard the purr rumbling in his throat, I was given all of the reassurance and comfort I needed for the moment.

Chapter 16

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

Last moonhigh was probably the most overwhelming and upsetting night of my life. Since then, regret and remorse had been tugging at me, so roughly as if I were running at the fastest speed I could, yet my fur was caught on a branch and was forcing me back towards it. I knew that this regret and remorse probably would have emerged at some point in the future, but the blow of it all was rougher then I had ever imagined it being.

How could I have been so stupid? That Goldenshine - the one that had been watching my from the outside - telling me that everything I was doing was wrong, I was betraying my Clan by meeting with Breezepelt, you are losing a part of you by doing this, what happened to your dedication to your Clan? Had been there with me throughout the entire time I had made these stupid choices, but I had ignored the Goldenshine that I knew. And unfortunately, it wasn't until I had learned that I had been expecting kits, not any time earlier, that I realized how dumb and flighty I had been.

But now, that was going to change. That dumb and flighty Goldenshine was gone. For good.

Ever since I had run back to camp with my kit in my jaws, I had practically been hiding in the nursery. Even though ThunderClan didn't know my full secret, or any of it really, thanks to Mousewhisker, I didn't want to show my face in front of Firestar at all. *He will never trust me again!* I thought to myself. I knew that that probably wasn't true, but it sure did in the moment. *He caught me with a cat from another Clan twice!*

Now, it was the sunhigh after the happenings of last night. I was staring lovingly down at Swiftkit as he suckled at my belly. Being the big and strong kit that he was, he had already opened his eyes. I had been surprised to see that his eyes were a dark bluish-gray,

similar to mine. He was so perfect, and I knew that I was going to give him all of the love and care that I had in me. I didn't care that he had come out of such a terrible situation. It wasn't his fault, and just as Snowflight had told me, he was a light in all of the darkness.

Just as Snowflight happened to cross my mind, I was surprised to see my sister poke her head into the nursery, her pale blue eyes full of worry.

"Hey, Goldenshine?" She meowed in a low voice. "Can I talk to you for a moment?" I then watched as Snowflight then quickly glanced over at the other queens, Daisy and Whitewing, sitting in the den. "Sorry... in private, please?"

Private isn't really something I can do at the moment, I thought as I looked down at Swiftkit. *And for six more moons at that...*

"We'll watch over Swiftkit, Goldenshine."

I turned my head around at the kind voice that I heard to see Daisy standing up and walking over to Swiftkit. She gently picked him up in her mouth by the scruff.

Thank StarClan for Daisy, I thought as I briefly touched my nose to her's. "Thank you," I murmured to her, putting the tip of my tail on her shoulder.

"Goldenshine, let's go!" Snowflight hissed, seeming eager to get out of camp all of the sudden. Snowflight was never usually so demanding. *I wonder what's up?*

Now feeling very concerned and eager to know what was going on, I quickly stood up and ran after my sister.

I trotted just behind Snowflight for a while as we traveled through ThunderClan territory. Eventually, we found ourselves just beside the abandoned Twoleg nest where I knew Snowflight went to collect herbs often.

I let out a huff, a bit exhausted from the travel, as I settled down in front of Snowflight. "Okay, so, what's wrong?" I asked her worriedly. "Did something happen?"

I watched as Snowflight sighed and then looked down at the ground, shaking her head slowly. "I don't even know how to tell you this..." she murmured.

My eyes widened. "Oh, StarClan, Snowflight, what did you do?"

My ears flicked in alarm as Snowflight's head shot back up at me, her eyes filled with a mix of surprise and worry. "What do you mean?" She meowed defensively. "What do you think I did?"

"I don't know! That's why I asked!" I meowed back, rolling my eyes. "Forget it. Just tell me what's going on."

While Snowflight tried to gather her thoughts, I sat there, simply waiting to hear what she had to say. "Well... I just had to talk to someone, and I knew that I would go to you over any cat..." she rambled on, before shaking her head quickly and focusing her gaze on me. "It's about Jayfeather..."

I narrowed my eyes with suspicion. *If that cranky furball has hurt her...* "What about Jayfeather?" I muttered.

Snowflight sighed before answering, "Well... this morning, at early dawn, he woke up, and all of the sudden he was so protective of me. He immediately asked where I was and if I was okay."

I just nodded, but what Snowflight was saying seemed a little strange to me, to say the least. I've never known Jayfeather to be that protective, or protective even at *all*. I've always known he cared for Snowflight, sure, he never showed it explicitly. Certainly not enough to do what Snowflight was describing to me. I knew that he never usually showed much affection for others.

I pulled myself away from my confused thoughts as I heard Snowflight continue. "After that... *weird* experience, I decided to go collect some herbs, since I couldn't go back to sleep," she meowed. "He immediately asked if he could go with me."

I squinted my eyes and lashed my tail. "Has he always been like this, or was that the first time?" I asked her.

"I mean sure, we like to go collect herbs together, but if we're

talking Jayfeather being *desperate* to come with me, first time!" she responded, her ice-blue eyes wide. Then she continued on, "Once we were out in the forest, Jayfeather was still acting like I was going to be snatched up by a fox or badger at any moment. So, I asked him what was wrong..."

"And then?" I asked, my eyebrows raising with intrigue.

Snowflight sighed once again while shaking her head. "Well, to make a long story short, he started going on about how he probably was just out of it from a lack of sleep, and that I was a nuisance-"

"*What?!*" I exclaimed, standing up. "How dare he? I'm going to-"

"Goldenshine, wait," Snowflight meowed urgently, using her tail to press my haunches back to the ground. "That's not all."

I took a deep breath to calm down, then lashing my tail to signal Snowflight to go on.

The look on her face almost made it seem like she was shocked by her own words. "Then, once I began to walk away, he caught up with me and..."

I tensed up, getting nervous as Snowflight had paused.

"He... he confessed his feelings for me," Her eyes began to glimmer as she had said that. "And he told me how much he cared for me, and that if I ever felt that I was in danger... that I should tell him."

My mouth dropped and my eyes widened. I was utterly baffled at what I had just heard.

That is not like Jayfeather at all!

I had now never been so desperate to hear the end of a story. "What did you do after that?" I asked her, growing even more nervous. "I mean, how do you feel about that? Do you have feelings for him, too?"

Snowflight hesitated greatly before finally speaking. "Well... I didn't say much, I guess," she murmured, looking back down at the

ground. "We just continued to collect herbs for a little while longer, and up until now we've just been working like usual."

I narrowed my eyes once again. Snowflight hadn't answered one of my questions - the one I thing that was the most relevant to the situation. Yet, she had avoided it. *Her mind is probably scattered right now*, I rationalized. *Great StarClan, if I found out that a friend that I had worked alongside for moons confessed their feelings for me, I would be discombobulated too!*

"I see," I simply murmured, staring back at my sister as she met my gaze again. "Very, very strange..."

"You're telling me," Snowflight replied, snorting. "I just wonder what warranted him to freak out so much this morning, what brought him to bring all of that up when he did? I'm sure he would have hidden that secret his whole life if he had to."

I tilted my head, realizing that Snowflight was right. If Jayfeather had feelings for a cat when he wasn't supposed to, I could say with complete certainty that he would have taken that secret to his burial spot. "Did anything interesting happen between my kitting and you going to sleep?" I asked Snowflight.

Snowflight sat and thought for a few heartbeats.

"Well, he was fine last night," she explained. "But it was when he woke up at dawn that he was suddenly so protective."

I nodded, and then my ears perked up as I realized something. It was a completely logical explanation.

"I think he could've had a nightmare," I realized out loud. "and... maybe you were in it? He could've dreamt of losing you or something. Maybe that's what caused him to say that stuff to you out loud, fearing that he would never get to tell you."

Snowflight blinked, suddenly looking stunned. "Great StarClan. That's kind of frightening, isn't it?" She breathed, her eyes wide.

"Every cat has dreams!" I insisted to Snowflight. "And anyways, Jayfeather's probably tempted to take them more seriously than

they are, being a medicine cat."

"True," Snowflight murmured, nodding and letting out a sniff. "Even if that was why... I have no idea where we stand at this point. Do you think that I should talk to him about it?"

I shrugged. "I would," I responded. "If you two are going to continue to be medicine cats together, you have to figure out how to get past this." *Great StarClan, that sure is going to be difficult though!*

After those words, silence fell in the clearing as neither of us spoke. I watched as Snowflight sat where she was for many heartbeats. I was very curious as to what she could *possibly* be thinking at this point. I began to scan my head around, looking aimlessly around the forest as I waited for my sister to speak again.

"Maybe it could work out..."

My head shot back in her direction, making sure that the words I had just heard were actually coming from my sister. "Snowflight, are you serious?"

Snowflight looked up at me. "Yes, I'm serious! No one has to know!" She insisted to me. "To finally answer your previous question - yes, I care for Jayfeather *immensely,* too. I've had something for him since I was an apprentice!"

I couldn't even believe what I was hearing. Hearing Snowflight say that she had wanted to be a medicine cat when we were apprentices was hard enough to hear! Now she *was* a medicine cat, and she was going to throw it all away because she fell for her mentor?

I shook my head quickly at my sister, knowing exactly what I was going to say to try to talk her out of this. I mean, I had firsthand experience of what it was like to try to be with a cat you loved, but shouldn't be with. "Trust me, Snowflight, you do not want to go through with this!" I hissed at her. "*No one has to know*, is what Breezepelt and I said to each other when we decided to meet up, and you know how that turned out, for StarClan's sake!"

I was very strongly trying to contain my anger now. I couldn't

believe that Snowflight was saying things like this, especially after what she had watched me go through just *yesterday*.

My eyes widened as I noticed that Snowflight's eyes were beginning to fog up. "It's so unfair!" she wailed. "Medicine cats deserve love just as much as warriors do! We never are allowed to feel that urge to be with another cat. We have to feel badly about loving others."

I just sighed at her words. "I know how you feel, Snowflight. I *completely* understand. But it just can't be done. No matter how hard cats try, they can never get away with it!"

Snowflight stood up, giving me a single sharp nod. "But I'm going to change that!"

I unsheathed my claws and sank them into the dirt, blown away by my sister's behavior. By no means was I trying to put myself above her, but this was the first time in ever in one of our little quarrels that I knew that I was in the right. Had Snowflight learned nothing from what I did? "What has gotten in to you?" I growled at her, speaking my thoughts out loud. "You are not the sister I've always known!"

Snowflight eyes burned with love and anger at the same time as she spoke her next words. "I may not have realized it completely when I was young, but I *do* have feelings for Jayfeather, feelings that will not go away easily."

I looked up to the sky, almost as if to ask StarClan inwardly, *are you hearing this nonsense?* "That's no excuse!" I retorted. "You would get in as much trouble as I did! Two medicine cats together? That's insane!"

"At least I didn't just meet a random cat from another Clan and just agree to meet with him and be his mate!"

I barred my teeth, hissing as I dug my claws into the ground. "How could you even say that? I'm almost *glad* all of that happened, for your sake! Now you know the consequences of being with someone you are not supposed to, which gets you into big trouble, which means that you shouldn't do it, Great StarClan, Snowflight!"

At this point, I thought I was the only one of the two of us that was about to burst into flames, but when I glanced back at Snowflight, I looked to see unsheathed claws, blue eyes blazing with anger, fur puffed out to make her look twice her size, and a fluffy tail sticking almost straight up in the air.

I took a few steps back, intimidated by my own sister for the first time in my whole life.

Snowflight then took a deep breath and then sat back down. At first I thought that she was going to realize how crazy she sounded, but it only was worse. "Why do I even need your approval?" she asked, almost half to herself. "You aren't even supporting me, anyway!"

I didn't even know how to respond after that. I had never seen Snowflight like this at all. It almost made me sick. *Snowflight must really love Jayfeather for her to be like this...*

"Some sister you are!" Snowflight muttered just loud enough for me to hear, yet she might as well have yowled it throughout the whole forest from how it tore through my heart. I let out a hiss, breaking my gaze from her. Then, after a few heartbeats, I then heard a few rustles ahead, and I turned back to see that Snowflight was gone.

I let out the most exasperated sigh that I had in my whole life. I truly felt as if I had been in one on one combat with a mountain lion. *What am I going to do now?*

I stood up and decided that I would go right back to camp, knowing that Swiftkit would be waiting for me. I wasn't going to bother finding Snowflight again. *Maybe after she calms down, we can talk again,* I thought. *And I'll try to talk some sense into her.*

As I was padding slowly back to camp, I paused as I suddenly heard rustles coming from bushes just behind. I began to look around, my eyes and ears open for any signs of life or movement.

"Hello? Snowflight?" I whispered.

No answer.

I shrugged and ran quickly the rest of the way to camp. Once the

camp entrance was in sight, I paused again and flicked my ears as I thought of something. *There's someone else* I *need to talk to!* I realized to myself before letting out a snort. *Hopefully it will go better than what just happened...*

As soon as I crawled through the gorse tunnel, I started to look for gray and white pelt of Mousewhisker. I glanced over to my right to see him eating a mouse with his sister, Hazeltail.

I quickly ran up to him. "Mousewhisker!" I called out to try and get the former farm cat's attention.

As soon as he heard my meow, he stood up and turned to his sister. "I have to go," he meowed, touching his nose to Hazeltail's. "I'll see you later."

Hazeltail nodded and continued to eat her mouse. Mousewhisker ran up to me and put the tip of his tail on my shoulder. "How about we go somewhere more private?" He whispered, nodding his head back towards the camp entrance.

I nodded and then proceeded to lead Mousewhisker out of camp without another word. Once we were out of view or earshot from any cats, we sat down and I wrapped my tail around my paws.

The first thing that I did once we were settled was let out an exaggerated sigh and nudge Mousewhisker's shoulder with my tail. "Mousewhisker, I just want to thank you so much for saving me from a *lot* of trouble last night," I immediately told him.

Mousewhisker purred with amusement as he shrugged. "It's no problem," he responded kindly. "It's just what a friend would do. You looked like you were in a bit of a bind!"

My eyes sparkled with gratitude as I looked back at my friend. "*Seriously*, you have no idea how much you saved me!"

Mousewhisker let out another purr of laughter. "It's fine, really. I'm glad to do it," he meowed before putting the tip of his tail on my shoulder. "And don't worry, you don't have to tell me who the real father is. That stays between you and him."

"Thank you," I whispered, touching my nose to Mousewhisker's gratefully. "You're literally a blessing from StarClan."

As I pulled away, I watched as Mousewhisker then began to around to check once again if any cat was around. "Just to make things more believable," he murmured, "we should act a little more affectionate around each other in front of other cats... but we certainly don't have to if it makes you uncomfortable."

I shook my head, actually completely okay with that. "No, no, that's actually a good idea. We'll do that!"

Mousewhisker nodded back to me, but before he could say anything else, I flinched as I heard a loud and angry growl come from the camp entrance.

I whipped myself around to see my mother, Lilypetal, storming out of ThunderClan camp, her lips curled back into a snarl and her fur bristled out to make her look twice her size.

Chapter 17

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

My whole body seemed to be in flames as I stormed out of the ThunderClan camp. And I'm sure my ruffled fur well-represented the anger and scatter-brained-ness that I was feeling on the inside, too.

I was so infuriated that once I was out of camp, I didn't even notice Mousewhisker and Goldenshine standing by the camp entrance, staring at me with wide eyes.

"Lilypetal, what's wrong?" Goldenshine asked me, her voice clearly filled with worry.

I barred my teeth as I shot my gaze at her. Just as I was about to bark out a spitting retort, I took a deep breath and tried to contain my anger as best as I could. *I'm not going to take any of this out on another cat, let alone one of my daughters!* "Don't worry about it, Goldenshine," I muttered to my daughter, not meeting her gaze. I hated being so cold to her, but I knew that if I talked to any cat for too long, I would only upset them. "I just need some time alone right now, please."

Goldenshine nodded, her eyes wide with concern before turning back to Mousewhisker. I quickly ran into the forest after that, needing to blow off steam more than I ever had in my entire life.

I mean, the whole of me wanted to run back to camp, to Thornclaw, and shred him to *bits!* But, there was a *tiny* piece of me that thought better of it. So, I continued to walk away deeper into the forest, trying my best to not dwell on what had just happened.

Around sunhigh, I had been lying in the main ThunderClan camp clearing sharing a mouse with Leafpool. I had just been on a water patrol, and then a hunting patrol, so I was taking a quick rest and

grabbing a meal before I had to go on another one.

After I had finished my meal and said my goodbyes to Leafpool, I decided that I was going to go to the warriors den to take a quick nap. I had passed Thornclaw as I was walking. For a moment, I tried to ignore his burning gaze, but it hadn't worked. I had glared at my former mate and rolled my eyes, not being able to hold back my bitter words. And to be honest, my tolerance for him was lowering with each passing day.

"*Please*, Thornclaw, I understand that you are angry," I meowed to him desperately, "but do you have to glare at me every time I am as far as *four* fox-lengths from you? I'm sorry, but that's not fair."

He stood up from where he was sitting, his gaze still burning into me. "What do you expect?" He hissed. "How could I be the smallest bit *kind* to you when I know that you don't even trust me?"

I barred my teeth and tried to hold back a growl. "I didn't even say that I don't trust you," I breathed frustratedly, closing my eyes and shaking my head slowly.

"You said that you weren't proud of me," Thornclaw muttered back, his eyes narrowed. For a moment I wondered if the crack of hurt in his voice had just been in my imagination.

I shook it off immediately. "Sure, out of my anger, I maybe said that," I admitted, rolling my eyes again. "But I meant that I wasn't proud of the *decision*. I just don't believe that training with the Dark Forest is a good idea, or *safe*, and you were infuriated when I tried to tell you that."

I then took a deep breath and stepped closer to Thornclaw, realizing that now might be the chance for us to smooth things over and explain our sides of the story. "Thornclaw, you know how much I care about you," I meowed softly, trying to meet his gaze. "All I want is the best for you, and I'm sorry if the way that I showed it seemed harsh, but I was just being honest with you."

I actually felt a slight twinge of hope as Thornclaw's eyes seemed to sparkle for just a moment. But to my dismay, after another

heartbeat, his gaze darkened once again, and he simply blinked and then turned around to walk away.

Oh, no he did not!

I growled, bubbling up with anger all over again as I intercepted him. "Are you kidding me? You are *not* going to walk away from me again!" I hissed. "You can't just *walk away* whenever I try to talk to you now! Is that how far down the rabbit hole we've gotten?"

The infuriation inside of me rose the more that I spoke, and when Thornclaw just continued to stand there, *glaring* at me, I couldn't take it anymore. Brambleclaw had tried to talk to him, and just now, I had laid it all out myself, but neither of the attempts had worked.

I took a deep breath in an attempt to simmer down, but it was almost as if my bristled fur was stuck as it was. "I see how it is," I nearly whispered back to Thornclaw, my voice hoarse with pain. I then forced myself to turn around and pad towards the camp entrance, my head practically pounding and my ears hot with anger. "May StarClan banish all the fleas from your nest."

To my surprise, I thought I could hear the pawsteps of my former mate moving quickly behind me. I slightly turned my head back to see that the golden tabby tom had turned back around to face me. To my disappointment, his eyes were still dark and unreadable.

I paused and stared at him with narrowed eyes, watching as he then began to open his mouth, but no words were coming out. Maybe he had been about to apologize for everything, or maybe he was trying to come up with another reason to patronize me. Whatever it was, I certainly wasn't at a mindset where I could listen at the moment. "Don't even bother, Thornclaw. Save it," I growled to him before whipping myself around again. "Just save it!"

And then is when I had run out of camp and into the forest, needing desperately to get some air and to be by myself for a little while. *What has gotten into him?* I wondered to myself as I traveled. I had always known Thornclaw to be such a magnificent warrior. It was one of the many reasons that I had fallen in love with him; he was

loyal, determined, brave, and so patient.

Though he could have a quick temper at moments, I would have never imagined him as a cat that would completely turn on someone else in anger, especially me, who he was typically more tender to than most. *That* sure had changed. *Thornclaw would need to have a pretty amazing explanation to get me to understand why he's been acting like he is...*

I sighed as I emerged through some bushes and walked up to face the lake. I sat down and looked at all of my surroundings, trying to focus on something rather than the embarrassing squabble I had just been through.

"Lilypetal?"

I turned around at the soft and kind voice I heard behind me. It was my own mother, Mistpelt, emerging from the bushes that I had just traveled through.

"How are you?" she asked worriedly. By the wary and concerned look in her eyes, I could tell that she had witnessed what had just happened, or at least had heard about it.

I turned back to face the lake. "I've been better, I'll admit," I muttered.

Mistpelt padded up to sit beside me. "Listen, Lilypetal. It may not seem like it right now, but everything is going to be okay," she told me, putting the tip of her tail on my shoulder.

"How do you know?" I replied, not being able to suppress the whimper in my voice.

Mistpelt flashed me a sympathetic look before turning her head to face the lake. "I suppose now is a better time than any to tell you this story," she murmured.

I turned back to look at my mother, my ears flicking with sudden intrigue. "What story?" I asked.

"The story of why I left Scourge."

I couldn't help but cringe at hearing my father's name, and to be honest, I probably would for seasons to come. But, I was luckily beginning to settle with the fact that he was my father, and Mistpelt seemed truly sorry that she had hidden it all from me. So, luckily, Mistpelt and I were definitely on better terms now.

I took a deep breath as my mother's words settled in. "Oh, yeah?" I breathed, tilting my head.

Mistpelt nodded to me, her eyes looking deep with so many emotions as she continued to stare out at the lake. "As hard as it may be to believe, Scourge and I were once deeply in love. Or... so I *thought*," she meowed softly. "I admired him so much. He seemed to handle his great authority so well, and so many cats looked up to him. I thought that he was so... so, just... great."

I simply nodded at Mistpelt, waiting for her to go on and trying not to let images of my mother and the fox-hearted creep fill up in my head. The thought of my mother being in love with such an evil cat still disgusted me, and probably always would. *But she didn't see that part of him at first,* I tried to tell myself.

"It was actually the day that you came into the world that I left Scourge," Mistpelt went on. "The day started off normally. I was in the Twolegplace, and your father was gone-"

I screwed my eyes shut. "You can just call him by his name," I muttered, not being able to help cutting off Mistpelt.

Mistpelt finally looked over to meet my gaze as she nodded. "Understood," she murmured before looking back at the lake. "Anyway, Scourge had been gone for most of the day, longer than usual. So I followed his scent trail all the way out into the forest."

I put the tip of my tail on Mistpelt's shoulder as she went on, shaking her head slowly. A shiver then ran down Mistpelt's spine. "That was when I had found him, ripping all nine of Tigerstar's lives away..."

My mouth dropped. "No way..." I breathed. "I had no idea that you had gotten to witness that!"

Mistpelt simply nodded to me slowly, her eyes wide. "It was then that I discovered who Scourge really was. He was a heartless, selfish, and *savage* cat. I didn't care that we shared a kit anymore," she explained. "I told that flea-pelt that I was sorry that I ever met him, and I never returned to the Twolegplace again."

"And that's when you joined ThunderClan, right?" I asked, tilting my head.

Mistpelt nodded. "Yes, it was," she answered. "And I was happier there than I ever was at the Twolegplace with your fath-, I mean, Scourge."

I raised my eyebrows. "Really?" I questioned, beginning to shift my paws back and forth as I wondered why Mistpelt had decided to tell me this story now. "So... you said that this was a better time than any to tell me this story. So, why now?" *Is she saying that I should give up on Thornclaw forever, just like she gave up on Scourge?* For some reason, my heart almost felt physically pained as that occurred to me. "Are you trying to tell me that Thornclaw is a savage murderer as well?"

Mistpelt purred with amusement as she shook her head. "Great StarClan, not at all!" Mistpelt exclaimed, wrapping her tail around my shoulders. "I simply wanted to say that even despite that heartbreak and losing the cat I loved, I was able to be strong again and find happiness somewhere else." I then watched as Mistpelt sighed. "But I have to admit, your situation is a little different. I've known Thornclaw longer than you have. And I also know *toms*."

"Oh, yeah?" I murmured, tilting my head to the side again. "What do you mean?"

Mistpelt rolled her eyes. "Toms might as well be kits by the way that they handle situations like this," she explained, purring. "But, I do have to say, Thornclaw is a very mature and sensible tom, and I'm sure just a bit ago you would agree with me on that. I'm surprised that he would act like he is."

"Really?"

"Yes," Mistpelt answered me before nudging me with her shoulder. "But I think I know why he is."

I gasped, for some reason very eager to hear what Mistpelt's opinions were on this. "Why? How?" I asked, trying to keep my tail from twitching anxiously.

Mistpelt narrowed her eyes as a smirk emerged on her face. "Lilypetal, have you ever heard of the saying, 'love makes you crazy'?"

I snorted as I nodded. "Unfortunately, yes I have," I murmured. *But I'm not going to tell you why, otherwise I'd be telling another cat that Goldenshine's kit is really Breezepelt's.*

And luckily, Mistpelt didn't question me. "Whatever you two fought about, Thornclaw is obviously very hurt at the fact that you disagreed with him on something," Mistpelt meowed. "Believe it or not, but he wants to come back to you more than anything."

I snorted again. "Heh, that's funny," I muttered.

"But I'm not joking!" Mistpelt insisted, flicking her ears. "Lilypetal, I saw how Thornclaw was with you before you fought the first time. He truly loves and respects you more than any other cat. Every time you talk to him, every time you gave him advice, he looked at you like you were a warrior of LionClan speaking to him." We both purred with amusement for a heartbeat before Mistpelt went on. "He values what you have to say. So, when he was told *by you* that you didn't respect his decision, he was probably immensely hurt. He was crushed by the fact that the cat he loved and cared about most was disappointed in him. So, his initial reaction was to lash out."

"But that doesn't explain why he then insisted that we can't be mates anymore," I muttered bitterly.

Mistpelt sniffed. "Oh, yes it does, my love," she purred. "It may have seemed like Thornclaw wanted nothing to do with you anymore, but in his mind, he really thought that he was doing you a favor."

I shrugged as I tried to comprehend Mistpelt's words. "I don't see

how," I admitted. *He seemed nothing but angry with me the entire time we quarreled.*

"Well, I do," Mistpelt meowed. "Basically, Thornclaw seeing *you* disapprove of his actions, the cat that he loves with his whole heart, made him question if he even deserved you. So, he let you go. He wants to be angry with you, so that's all you see, but-"

"-But he's separating himself because he feels like I deserve better?" I concluded by Mistpelt's words. "Wow... you do read toms well, don't you?"

Mistpelt purred and shrugged. "I suppose that I do," she meowed, licking my cheek.

A purr rumbled in my throat as my mother's sweet scent flooded through my nose. "Thanks, Mistpelt," I meowed, licking her cheek back in gratitude. "So, with all of that in mind, what do you suggest that I do?"

Mistpelt thought for a moment before answering, "You both need a little time to gather your thoughts," she concluded. "Clearly you both were not in a good headspace when you had this most recent fight. Just take some more time for yourself, and then see what happens. Things like this can't be forced."

I couldn't help but let out a huff. Mistpelt's advice had uplifted me more than I could have ever thought possible. I was so tempted to pelt back to camp, find Thornclaw and twin my tail with his as I pressed my muzzle on his right now. But, I knew that my mother's latest words were right. And, I was still quite angry with Thornclaw's behavior, even if there was some reasoning behind it. *And Mistpelt's words are so true - things can't be forced. I'm still angry with him, and I'm sure he's still angry with me. So, just seeing what happens is probably the best thing...*

"I couldn't agree more," I purred, nodding as I took a stretch. I then rose and touched my nose to Mistpelt's. "Thank you, really."

"Of course," Mistpelt purred, licking my head. Then, I suddenly felt my mother flinch beside me.

"What's wrong?" I asked, pulling away from her, worried. But almost immediately after, I let out a mrrow of laughter as Mistpelt licked a drop of rain from her nose. Then, the rumble of thunder sounded from just above, and several rain drops began to pelt down on us.

Mistpelt and I let out squeals as our fur began to quickly become soaked by the precipitation. Mistpelt ran past me, seemingly heading in the direction of camp. "Run for your life!" She purred as she practically leaped through some bushes and into the forest.

I let out a *mrrow* of laughter as I began to follow, blinking my eyes open and closed against the rain. "Right behind you!" I yowled we then ran, heading to camp to take shelter.

Chapter 18

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

I cringed back, startled as lightning flickered outside. Just below me, Swiftkit squealed loudly and nestled himself deeper into my belly.

I sighed, touching my nose to his small head. *Poor darling...* I thought, curling my tail tighter around my son. *Your first thunderstorm. But I'm here to protect you.*

Soon after talking to Mousewhisker, it had started pouring rain in the camp, thunder following soon enough. So, all of the cats in ThunderClan had taken shelter, us not being RiverClan cats even remotely. I had come to the nursery straight away to stay with Swiftkit, and I knew that I had already been away from him long enough. The sight of my son had warmed my heart as soon as I had laid eyes on him.

As Swiftkit then let out another distressed whimper, I bent my head down once again and lapped my tongue soothingly over his head.

Then suddenly, just as another flash of lightning appeared outside of the den, I heard a screech come from what sounded like far into the forest. My heart sank as I realized that it sounded like it was filled with agony and pain.

I stopped licking Swiftkit and lifted my head, my ears pricking with alarm. *What in the name of StarClan...? A screech like that can't mean anything good...*

I stood up quickly and looked around the nursery, suddenly feeling like I had to take action, for some reason.

Daisy seemed to immediately notice my distress. I clearly wasn't doing a good job of hiding my worries. "What's wrong, my dear?"

The queen asked me calmly.

I didn't turn to face her, for I was staring at my destination - which was out of this nursery. "Daisy, can you watch Swiftkit for a bit?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Daisy nodding, but her head tilted with confusion and her blue eyes were wide. "Alright, Goldenshine" she meowed kindly, but there was a hint of concern in her voice. "Of course, I will."

Thank StarClan, I thought before briefly looking down at Swiftkit. *I'm sorry, my love, I have to go for just a bit. But once I'm back I will not leave your side again.* After briefly licking my son on the head in farewell, I pelted out of the den. I was almost instantly soaked as I became exposed out in the rain.

For just a moment as I crawled through the camp entrance, I was shielded from the rain, but large raindrops continued to land on my head once I was out.

I quickly paced through the dark forest, scanning my surroundings constantly. I was more paranoid that I had been in my entire life.

Besides the twitching of leaves as rain fell, everything was still. And besides the distant rumbling of thunder and the quiet pelting of rain, everything was quiet.

There aren't any patrols out at the moment, and I can't smell any other Clan... I realized. *Who was out here?*

I flicked my ears, my eyes narrowing. *Where did that screech come from?*

As I got deeper in the forest, my pawsteps suddenly seemed to be dragging with dread as the strong stench of blood flooded through my nose.

Oh, no... this can't be good at all, I thought nervously, trying to contain myself as I was suddenly overwhelmed with fear. I then *very* reluctantly started to follow the *awful* stench of blood. It led me on a specific path, but it still seemed to be spreading all over the forest. *Some cat was definitely wounded, or worse,* I then realized,

taking a deep breath, bracing myself for some sort of gruesome sight ahead of me.

And sure enough, right as the blood scent became as strong as ever, I looked up from my sniffing to see the bloody body of a cat, its fur completely red and *covered* with blood.

I mean, I couldn't even tell what color its pelt was, but I observed what I could. It was a smaller cat with a long, fluffy tail. My heart broke as I saw that the cat was shredded, and I knew that there was absolutely no way that it was still alive.

My mouth dropped in horror at the sight, and I stepped up closer to try to make out who the cat was. *Was there maybe some border skirmish?* I wondered fearfully. *Will I have to take this body to another Clan? But I don't even know where it comes from! the blood is overtaking any sort of Clan scent it could carry.* I then let out a huff of exasperation as I *still* couldn't determine who this mystery cat was.

Well, at least, not until lightning flashed in the sky.

When I saw who the cat was... I couldn't believe my eyes, to say the least. I felt like I was going to vomit. I recognized the face, the lean build, the white fur, the blue eyes that were now staring off into nothing...

Snowflight!

I gasped and pelted over to her. "No, no, no! *Please* be okay!" I meowed desperately, hovering over her. I then almost seemed to lose feeling in my entire body as I was overwhelmed with grief. I let myself fall to the ground, digging my head into my sister's body. "Snowflight..." I rasped, my voice thick with emotion. I then let out a loud wail and whimpered into Snowflight's bloody neck. *Why did this have to happen now? The last thing we did was fight!*

I only spent a few heartbeats there before not being able to suppress a growl. I slowly stood back up, unsheathing my claws and sinking them into the ground. Anger was suddenly surging through me. I knew full well that Snowflight had not died of any sort of natural causes.

Some cat had purposely done this to her. *Who in the name of StarClan would do this?* I asked myself, gritting my teeth. *And why?* "Why?" I wailed out loud, staring down at my sister's body. "Oh, Snowflight, please..."

"There's no point in hoping Goldenshine. She's gone."

I flicked my ears as a new voice hissed from behind me. I turned immediately and gasped to see a cat that was almost as bloody as Snowflight was. Having at least some common sense, I knew that this cat standing before me was the perpetrator - Snowflight's scent was all over his pelt, and I could just barely see my sister's white fur in between his claws, which were red and completely covered in blood.

Who are you, and why would you do this to my sister? I asked the cat in my mind as I then felt my anger bubbling up inside of me again. *I hope that everything bad that could possible happen to you, happens to you, you fox-heart!*

I narrowed my eyes as I stared back at this cat who had mysteriously emerged from the shadows. Under all the blood on his pelt, I could just barely see that he had gray fur with possibly some darker gray patches? I knew for sure that his eyes were blue, and were filled with evil satisfaction and ambition.

I recognized this cat from when I had seen him in the forest as a kit. "Ashfur," I muttered angrily. I felt as if my pelt was on fire with infuriation, and even the rain wasn't going to put it out.

"Ah, so you recognize me!" He said in an ominously cheerful voice.

Of course I recognize those psycho and evil blue eyes. "What are you doing here?" I barked back. "Lilypetal chased you away moons ago!" And unfortunately, I was there to watch it, I thought as I briefly recalled escaping the camp with Snowflight as a kit. We had had found Lilypetal in mid-fight with Ashfur, and she had chased him away, and since then, he hadn't showed his pelt in ThunderClan territory even once.

At least... not until now.

I then watched with narrowed eyes as Ashfur let out a purr of amusement that sent a chill down my spine. "Did you really think that that *fool* of a warrior you call your *mother* was going to scare me away for good?"

I began to shake as Ashfur spoke, this entire situation finally beginning to sink in. Up until now, the denial and grief had been too strong; I almost couldn't comprehend what was going on, it was too much to take in.

But now, that denial and grief was being replaced by sheer anger.

"Why would you do this!?" I yelled to Ashfur, feeling my eyes well up with emotion.

An evil smirk slowly emerged on the speckled tom's face. "Why else?" He growled. "Lilypetal *ruined* my life. She took away everything that was important to me - my Clanmates' trust, my family, and my place in ThunderClan, all because she was scared of what I could do. She needed to pay!" He then flicked his tail to where Snowflight was lying. "I caught her wandering about in the forest by herself, and I just took the opportunity."

My claws sank into the earth and even ripped some grass off of the ground. How demented and psychotic could a cat get? *You killed my sister for revenge, just because you couldn't accept that you were incriminated for your wrongs.*

And I figured that I could be incriminated for what I was about to do, but I didn't care.

It was truly time for the real Goldenshine to come back, after she had lost herself.

That warrior with undeniable loyalty.

The one that leapt into danger if it meant saving those that she loved.

A growl emerged in my throat as I then lowered into a crouch. "You... you sick piece of crowfood!"

Without any hesitation, I leaped on Ashfur and managed to pin him to the ground. Knowing already that I wasn't going to give this cat any mercy, I bit down hard on his neck and I sank my claws deep into his shoulders.

Ashfur let out a wail of pain, and I was thrown off, literally and figuratively as he then kicked me off of him with his hind paws.

I landed with a thud against an oak tree just fox-lengths away, and I fell down into a bramble bush. The breath was knocked out of me, and the bark of the tree had raked down my back as I slid down.

I knew that I wasn't going to be able to get up immediately, to my complete fear and dismay. *Ashfur is going to kill me too, and then I can't avenge Snowflight, or save all of the Clans from his danger!*

As I attempted to catch my breath and stand up, I heard pawsteps creeping towards me slowly.

"Not the most amazing warrior in the Clan now, are you, huh?" Ashfur growled, purring with amusement as he approached. I let out a screech of terror as Ashfur slashed one of his claws across my head. Then, Ashfur raised his other paw, and I knew what he was preparing to do.

No! Not now!

I tried to build up the adrenaline and energy to jump from my spot and avoid the killing blow. But, before Ashfur could even attempt to finish me off, I gasped as I saw the flash of another cat leap on Ashfur.

Just as this happened, blood began to flow into my eyes, and I couldn't see what was going on at all. All I heard was many screeches of pain and the slashing of claws as they met fur and flesh. It was then that I was finally able to stand up, my breathing steady again.

I quickly shook out my fur. *Whoever that cat is fighting Ashfur, needs help!* I realized. With a rush of adrenaline, StarClan granted, I was able to leap back on Ashfur without any struggle. As I wriggled

around with the gray tom, I realized that I hadn't even ever noticed who had attacked Ashfur while I was on the ground. But it didn't matter at the moment.

Nothing did, except for making sure that this tom under my claws wasn't going to live any longer.

Luckily, the fighting between the two of us went on for only a few more heartbeats. I was able to pin down Ashfur once again and slash my bloody claws across his throat, full power, giving him the killing blow. I watched as Ashfur made an eerie gurgling sound before falling limp, a single shudder running down his body.

I backed off of the bloody lump of fur. *Snowflight, I have avenged you.*

I let out what was a mix of a whimper and a sigh, absolutely exhausted as I let myself fall to the ground. The fight had been quick, but it was brutal. And quite honestly, the first real fight I had ever been in with another cat. *Thank you StarClan, for giving me strength.*

From where I was lying, I then began to scan my surroundings. My breath caught in my throat as I caught sight of Snowflight once again, lying in her same place. But, just a few tail-lengths away from her, I noticed that there was another cat lying on the ground.

That must be the cat that leaped at Ashfur when I was trying to catch my breath... I realized, shaking my head quickly and blinking the blood out of my eyes. *Who are you, and why did you help me...?*

My question was immediately answered for me, and I couldn't believe my eyes when my vision focused again. Of course Ashfur was still there beside me, dead as a caught piece of prey, but the other cat lying near him was Jayfeather.

Jayfeather was the one who leaped at Ashfur? I thought, completely bewildered. *No way. No way in the name of the Dark Forest.*

I walked over to the ThunderClan cat weakly and nudged the medicine cat, thankful that he was still strong enough to even be

able to. And luckily, the gray tabby tom only seemed to have a few minor scratches.

"Jayfeather..." I choked out as he stood up. "How... why?"

Jayfeather let himself fall to the ground again, almost immediately after standing up. "I-I heard a screech..." he rasped.

I flicked my ears as Jayfeather said this. *Probably the same one that I heard*, I realized. I then shivered as I realized now that that had been Snowflight's pained yowl.

"Snowflight and I had been in the medicine den, and she told me that she was leaving to go and check on you," Jayfeather continued, trying to stand up once again. "After that, she never came back. Something told me that she was in danger, and I followed her scent trail." Jayfeather stared ahead with his blind eyes, clearly in shock as he explained his side of the story so calmly.

I shook my head quickly as something reoccurred to me. "How... how could you attack...?" I asked in complete disbelief, knowing quite well that the medicine cat was blind.

Jayfeather shook his head slowly, clearly even more baffled than I was. "I smelled a mixture of Snowflight and blood, and I..." he shuddered before going on. "I knew that she was dead. I recognized Ashfur's scent, and without thinking... I just pounced..."

"Wow," I whispered, my voice suddenly incredibly hoarse. "Wow, Jayfeather..."

"It didn't take much. He was already pretty weak, thanks to you," Jayfeather meowed. "But I also, as you would guess, can't really *fight*. Thank StarClan you leaped back in when you did and finished him off."

Finished him off. "I... *killed* him," I forced myself to say. Guilt flooded over me all of the sudden. *I... I just killed a cat.*

It was hard to convince myself that I had done such a thing. As a kit, as an apprentice, and even as a warrior now, I hoped that I would have never had to kill to win my battles. As great of a

warrior as I wanted to be, I knew that killing was never the way to achieve that. *But here we are...* I thought solemnly. *But it was for Snowflight. If I had to kill any cat in some circumstance, it would be this way.*

Suddenly, as I was beginning to drown in my own fear, sadness, and guilt, I heard a weak wail from Jayfeather, and I turned around to see that he had run over to Snowflight's body. He fell down beside her, his blind eyes clouded with emotion, and filled with pain and love.

My heart broke for the medicine cat. *Snowflight was his apprentice that he worked alongside for moons and moons, almost a season now. By now, you would expect that he really cared for her. And apparently he did... to the point of falling in love with her.*

I then found myself having to suppress another whimper as my eyes welled up with emotion once again. *And he had every reason to!* I thought sadly. *My sister was one of the kindest, smartest, and most patient cats that I knew. Oh, StarClan, why did you have to take her now?*

I let out a wail of grief as I fell down beside Jayfeather, digging my head into Snowflight's fur once again. *My sister...* I thought sadly. *We've been together all our lives and now she's gone!* In that moment, I wished more than anything in the world that I hadn't let Snowflight walk away after our argument. I should have chased after her and made things right before she died. She maybe wouldn't have had to die, if I had been with her!

I let out a weak and shaky sigh, trying to take in my sister's sweet scent for the last time, before her body grew cold and the scent of blood completely took over.

After several heartbeats, and I mean several, I rose my head up slightly as I noticed Jayfeather standing up.

I fully lifted up my head, watching the medicine cat as he seemed to have to force out his next words. "We... we should probably bring her back to camp, and give the news."

I simply gave a small nod and stood up, knowing that all I could do at this point was move forward, despite how much I wanted to stay where I was and just be sad. But, I couldn't lie here grieving for my entire life.

Before we lifted up Snowflight's body, I watched as Jayfeather spent several heartbeats looking at her, as if he could see. The blood had been washed away by the rain, and it almost seemed like she wasn't even wounded anymore.

He sighed, bending down once again and touching his nose to hers. "I'll see you in my dreams, my love."

My eyes widened at what Jayfeather had whispered. I had already known at this point that the gray tabby tom had had feelings for my sister, but he had never talked to *any* cat that way before, not even family. It almost seemed like that it wasn't Jayfeather who was talking. But that's just how shocking it was to me.

Then after one last lick on Snowflight's head, Jayfeather then began to try to lift Snowflight off of the ground. I quickly rushed over to help him.

It took a little while, with there just being two of us, but we eventually got Snowflight's body onto our backs, ready to bring her back to camp.

For her vigil, I realized. *Snowflight's vigil. Oh, StarClan, I never thought that I'd be thinking those words so early...*

I let out a sigh, exchanging a sorrowful glance with Jayfeather before beginning to carry Snowflight back to ThunderClan.

Chapter 19

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

I wanted to sink to the ground and let out a yowl as I saw Goldenshine and Jayfeather trudge into camp with Snowflight's body, *my daughter's body*, on their backs. But I simply stood where I was, too shocked and too numb with grief to speak.

It was clear that Snowflight was dead; She had gashes all over her body, and some parts even looked *shredded*. Rainwater had washed the blood away, but it was beginning to ooze from her wounds all over again.

I almost thought that I had lost the ability to breath. Not only out of sadness and anxiety, but because my daughter's death was the only thing on my mind, consuming my whole being, so much so that the knowledge of how to breath was almost pushed away. *It can't be...*

Pushing myself to finally move, I immediately ran over to meet Goldenshine and Jayfeather as I shook my head slowly. But, seeing Snowflight up close just brought in another unbearable wave of grief, as if it was the first time I was seeing her dead all over again.

"No!" I wailed as I pushed my nose into my daughter's fur. "*How* did this happen?" I then forced myself to look at Goldenshine, pulling my muzzle away from Snowflight's fur.

Goldenshine looked utterly emotionless. "I found her in the forest," she murmured. "Killed by Ashfur."

Uncontrollable anger immediately bubbled up inside of me. *Ashfur is back?!* I thought in complete rage and confusion. It had now been moons since I scared him out of ThunderClan territory. Since then, I had been able to live in complete ease, never catching his scent on our territory or hearing the rustles at night that I had when I was in the nursery. I thought that Ashfur was truly gone for good. After all,

his goal of hurting Squirrelflight had now been fulfilled.

But apparently, Ashfur's new found goal to hurt *me* had still needed to be accomplished, and it had been.

I growl began to rumble in my throat. I would run back out into that forest a hundred times if I knew that eventually, Ashfur would leave. *What am I saying? I'm going to kill the piece of crowfood!* "That mangy..." I unsheathed my claws and sank them into the ground. I then began to storm out of camp, but I could hear Goldenshine's quick pawsteps beginning to make their way ahead of me in order to intercept me.

"No!" My daughter exclaimed, leaping up to block the camp entrance.

I stared at her in confusion, my tail lashing with eagerness and anticipation. "What do you mean?" I demanded, trying to jump past Goldenshine. "Why won't you let me find him and kill him?"

"Because he's already dead," Jayfeather meowed, almost at a whisper.

My eyes widened in bewilderment. Now, I didn't even know how I felt; the evil cat I hated with a *passion* was finally dead, which gave me a sense of relief. But when it hit me that my precious daughter was dead, that small speck of relief suddenly went away.

"How was he killed?" I asked, barely able to get the words out.

My ears flicked as I heard Goldenshine's quiet whimper. "I..." Goldenshine whispered, "I did it. For Snowflight."

I stared back at my daughter, my heart managing to warm up just slightly. *Goldenshine killed Ashfur for her sister...* I realized, touching my tail tip to Goldenshine's shoulder just for a heartbeat. *This is the warrior that I've seen in her all along, and I hated to see her lose it when her loyalty wavered.*

Then, without saying anything else, Jayfeather and Goldenshine began to travel deeper into the camp, Goldenshine sliding under Snowflight to help Jayfeather once again. I felt my eyes cloud as

they then carried her to the middle of camp before finally lying her down.

I averted my gaze from my dead daughter for just a heartbeat, and looked over slightly to see that Thornclaw was staring sadly just as I had been, his eyes glittered with grief. His claws were unsheathed and were sinking themselves into the earth.

I then found myself watching my former mate, almost not being able to bear seeing him suffer so much, and alone.

I found myself taking a step forward towards Thornclaw. *Do I go talk to him?* I asked myself. I then let out a hiss, shaking my head quickly.

Lilypetal, now is not the time to hold an argument over your head, I told myself. *Our daughter just died. Our fight does* not *matter right now!*

I took a deep breath and slowly padded over to him. *Mistpelt said not to force anything,* I recalled in my mind. *Well, this isn't forced. Not at all.*

I then paused once I was about a fox-length in front of Thornclaw. I felt a pang of nervousness as I finally looked up to meet the tabby tom's gaze.

And in that moment, looking into Thornclaw's blue gaze, I realized how much I didn't want to be away from this cat anymore. Through my grieving and pained heart, I already knew of a way that I could put it back together again, and that was by letting the fight go, and bringing the love of my life *back* into my life. Dwelling on our quarrel wasn't worth it anymore. In fact, it *never* was.

As I stared back at Thornclaw, just by the intensity in his eyes, I could tell that he was thinking exactly as I was. I mean, that was one reason why we were always so good together; not even having to say one word to each other to be on the same page.

Our fight had thrown us a little off track, but I was never going to let it happen again.

Thornclaw and I were going to endure this together.

Almost as if we had been given a signal, Thornclaw and I stood up at the same time, running up to each other and pressing our muzzles together. In that heartbeat, I managed to feel a twinge of happiness as Thornclaw's warm scent flooded into my nose, and his familiar soft fur rubbed against my muzzle. I then let out another whimper as I dug my head into Thornclaw's chest.

"Oh, Lilypetal," Thornclaw meowed more softly than I had ever heard him speak, putting his muzzle on my head and pulling me closer to him with his tail. "I am so, so sorry."

I closed my eyes as Thornclaw brought me closer. I pulled away from his chest to meet his gaze once again. "Oh, Thornclaw. I am so, so sorry too." I then let out a sigh as the two of us stared into each other's eyes, our gazes reflecting our feelings of satisfaction, but immense grief with it as well.

And for the moment, I think we both knew that that was all we needed to say to each other.

After several heartbeats, I turned from my mate's gaze to look back at Snowflight, suddenly at a loss for words or even any thoughts all over again. *Thornclaw and I may be together again... but Snowflight is still gone, and I still feel lower than I ever have in my entire life.*

I let my head fall to the ground as I heard Thornclaw's quiet hiss. "I can't believe it," Thornclaw croaked, staring back at his daughter. "Why would Ashfur do this?" His voice got stiffer and stiffer as he spoke. His claws continued to sink into the earth, getting deeper and deeper.

I sighed, realizing unfortunately that I had a very clear answer to Thornclaw's question.

Yes, moons ago I had chased Ashfur away from the forest, but that had clearly not been enough, had it? I hadn't intimidated him enough, or maybe I didn't make things clear.

Whatever the reason was, I couldn't help but blame myself for my daughter's death.

"He wanted revenge. Revenge for what *I* did," I finally whispered tautly, trying to push down my own anger. "This is all my fault."

"Lilypetal, do *not* talk like that," Thornclaw demanded, turning my head towards him with his tail so that I could meet his gaze. "Listen, you chased Ashfur off so long ago. Did you think that he was going to come back? I certainly didn't."

I sighed shakily as more and more realizations rose in my head. "I wouldn't have even *needed* to chase him off if it wasn't for me and what I did at that Gathering..." I hissed.

"You're talking nonsense!" Thornclaw insisted as he continued to hold my head up with his tail. "You were doing the right thing when you exposed that flea-pelt to everyone. It was a truly heroic thing to do, and you probably saved everyone from the trouble that he was capable of."

At Thornclaw's words, I let out another wail and let my head fall back into my mate's chest. "But I didn't save Snowflight!" I sobbed into my mate's fur. *Snowflight, I am so sorry!*

As I whimpered, I then felt Thornclaw rub his tail along my flank as he licked my head soothingly. I could just barely hear him gently shushing me through the rain that continued to fall. "It's okay, Lilypetal," he murmured into my ear. "Everything will be okay. I love you."

"Oh, Thornclaw, I love you too," I whispered, pressing more deeply into his fur. *Oh, StarClan, how happy I am to be able to say that again...* I thought as I let out a sigh.

Then, Thornclaw and I stood there together for several heartbeats, sharing our grief together before finally turning and looking at our daughter again. She was now surrounded by her Clanmates, all of their gazes dark and solemn.

Thornclaw and I exchanged another glance full of sorrow before padding over to where our daughter was lying. As the two of us settled down, my eyes began to cloud all over again. I let out a shaky sigh as I dug my head into Snowflight's fur for one of the last

times.

It feels like she was just born, I thought to myself. *She was so fantastic and intelligent. She would have made a great mentor to future medicine cats...*

I then lifted my head up, just to take a quick glance to see who was still around. And, my heart was able to warm up slightly as I saw that beside Thornclaw, Mistpelt was lying on his other side, Goldenshine on my other side, and Jayfeather was beside her. Many other ThunderClan cats were surrounding the white she-cat as well.

I let out one last sigh, actually managing to feel a twinge of comfort and satisfaction as I let my head fall back into Snowflight's fur.

Goodbye, my dear. May StarClan light your path. I love you.

Chapter 20

[image]

Snowflight's POV

I opened my eyes to find myself in a beautiful forest.

At first, I was overwhelmed with confusion, wondering why in the name of StarClan I hadn't slept in the medicine den last night. Had I taken a walk out in ThunderClan territory and fallen asleep?

But, it didn't take me long at all to realize that this definitely wasn't the ThunderClan forest. In fact, I gasped as I began to process my surroundings. It was almost as if everything around me was glowing - the grass, the trees, and even a little stream that flowed in the center of my vision.

Oh my StarClan, It's so beautiful! I thought as I continued to look around, my eyes trying to flit over everything from where I sat.

I decided to stand up and look around some more, and even though I hadn't completely come to terms with it yet, I had already realized where I had woken up.

I'm... I'm in StarClan, I thought, letting out a sigh. I was filled with so many different emotions at once as this thought came to me. I didn't even know how to take it all in. *Ashfur killed me... What will the Clan think? Or my family?*

I sank to the ground again and began to whimper. My whole life was gone! All because Ashfur's strength was too much for me. I had gotten a full warrior's training as an apprentice before I became the medicine cat apprentice, but Ashfur's experience and size had basically thrown that *all* away. And hence why I was where I was.

Oh, Goldenshine, Lilypetal, Thornclaw... and Jayfeather... I'm sorry that I had to leave you all so soon. My heart suddenly felt physically broken. I never would get to see my parents again. I would never

get to talk and gossip with my sister again...

And Jayfeather... only StarClan knows what would've happened with us going forward, but nevertheless, never getting to be with him again was heart-wrenching. *Not only did I love him, but he was my mentor who taught me so much...*

I let out another shaky sigh, almost as if to try to release my grief. *Oh, StarClan...*

After what seemed like moons of me being overwhelmed with sadness, I flinched and let out a startled yelp as I felt a tail set itself on my shoulder.

"It's alright, Snowflight," a soft voice whispered to me.

I quickly opened my eyes, lifting up my head. "Who's there?" I asked urgently, beginning to shake slightly.

"It's alright," the sweet voice repeated. "Get up." I then felt a nose lightly nudge my shoulder.

I stood up slowly and turned around to see a beautiful tortoiseshell she-cat. She struck me with a strange feeling, but I was sure that I had never seen her before. All I knew was that I was comforted by her calm demeanor and her warm gaze.

I tried to return the warm gaze as I took a step closer to the she-cat. "Who are you?" I asked, my voice shaking slightly.

The she-cat took a step closer to me, and her sweet scent flooded through my nose.

"I am Spottedleaf," the mysterious cat meowed. "I was ThunderClan's medicine cat long before you came along."

I nodded, my eyes glowing with fascination as the tortoiseshell answered. *Hm, Spottedleaf...*

I had heard of Spottedleaf when I was *very* young, and had been been a brilliant medicine cat. She had been killed by one of ShadowClan's fiercest cats, Clawface. She had been far too young

when she was killed. *Like me, I suppose*, I realized, trying to push down grief once again.

So, I decided to focus on the cat that was in front of me. "Why are you here, Spottedleaf?" I asked her, beginning to calm down more and more even at just the sound of her soft voice.

I tilted my head to the side as I noticed Spottedleaf's amber eyes glitter with humor for just a heartbeat.

"Well... *we* have come here to tell you something," she meowed, lashing her tail almost as if to beckon someone. Or rather, *many* someones.

And sure enough, suddenly *countless* cats appeared behind Spottedleaf, almost *all* of them looking completely unfamiliar to me. I couldn't help but gasp with alarm, overwhelmed by all of the foreign faces. "What is going on?" I asked shyly, backing away a few steps.

I sat down and tried to breath more slowly as the cat I immediately recognized as Bluestar stepped forward. *I wasn't alive when she was leader, but no cat could mistake her noble presence and that blue-gray fur.*

Realizing that I was facing a past leader, I took a deep breath and decided to stand up again, waiting to hear what Bluestar had to say.

"Snowflight," the former ThunderClan leader began. "We are here to tell you that your journey as a Clan cat has not yet been fulfilled."

What?!

I tilted my head to the side, suddenly overwhelmed with intrigue and more confusion.

"You were so young when Ashfur killed you," Spottedleaf continued, her eyes briefly flashing with sympathy and sadness. "You haven't fulfilled what you were meant to do as a Clan that."

You keep saying that, but I still don't understand...

I nodded slowly as I tried to process what these StarClan cats were saying to me. I already knew that I would have to listen intently and thoroughly, for StarClan's words were never completely clear, always cryptic.

The cat that I knew as Yellowfang almost seemed to sense my pleas for more information. "What we're saying is," Yellowfang, a previous medicine cat rasped, "We are sending you back to ThunderClan."

No way! I couldn't help but gasp at the former medicine cat's words as my eyes widened in disbelief. "Send me back to ThunderClan? Send *me* back to ThunderClan?" I repeated, completely baffled.

"Yes, Snowflight. But, we are not sending you as the cat you are now," Bluestar meowed, padding up to stand next to Spottedleaf. "We are going to reincarnate you."

I felt a shiver run down my spine at that word, *reincarnate,* having a hard time processing the fact that this word was being paired up with me. It was so strange, thinking that I was almost being given another chance, a whole new life ahead of me. But would I know that? Would I remember anything from my past life, and the fact that Goldenshine was my sister, or that Lilypetal and Thornclaw were my parents.

Actually, I found myself very excited to find out. I wondered what this next life would bring to me, what it would be like. So, I nodded eagerly, and lashed my tail back and forth. "Reincarnate me..." I repeated out loud. "H-How will it work?"

"We are going to send you back as a young kit, lost in the forest," Bluestar explained. "ThunderClan will find you and take you in."

"Can you be sure?" I asked nervously. *I wouldn't want to be in any other Clan!*

"That is where you are meant to be," Spottedleaf meowed, dipping her head. "So, yes."

"Wow," I breathed. *I'm going back to ThunderClan... I'm not going to be*

returning to StarClan for a long time, aren't I? I then began to delve into possible reasons why this was happening to me - why my destiny hadn't been fulfilled, and why all of these StarClan cats believed that it should happen.

But, whatever it was, I trusted them, and was going to comply with their wishes. I then sighed, bowing my head and nodding to the many cats before. "I accept your request," I meowed clearly.

It was after I lifted my head up that I suddenly realized something. My heart suddenly felt like it was going to burst out of my chest as it welled up with nervous and began to beat faster.

"Wait a moment," I began nervously. "Will I be able to become a medicine cat again?" *Oh, how I wish that I could be back in that medicine den right now...*

My heart sank a little as I watched Spottedleaf shake her head. "That cannot be determined now," the she-cat answered. "Your fate will be chosen once you are grown. All you should know, is that you have a new destiny ahead of you, and we trust that you will fulfill it."

And I will.

Bluestar padded up to me and met my widened gaze. "Are you ready?" she asked.

I found myself hesitating at the ThunderClan leader's question. As I began to come to terms with what was going to happen to me, it made me realize - what if I don't recognize the relationships that I had from my life as Snowflight? What if I am found as this kit, and they had no idea that it was me? *I must say goodbye if I am able to...*

Suddenly feeling a twinge of panic, I shook my head shyly, not realizing it might upset the previous ThunderClan leader. So, I made sure to explain myself as soon as possible. "Can I make a few visits first?" I asked Bluestar quietly, my eyes filled with hope and eagerness.

At first Bluestar sighed with exasperation, but after a few

heartbeats, the blue-gray she-cat finally nodded, her blue eyes gleaming with understanding.

"As you wish."

Chapter 21

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

It was hard to sleep as the sadness from the previous day was engrained into my head. It seemed that every few heartbeats I had to shut my eyes as they welled up with sadness all over again.

Snowflight's vigil had just ended, and Longtail and Mousefur had taken out Snowflight's body to be buried. As much as I hadn't wanted to, Firestar had insisted to Thornclaw, Lilypetal, Jayfeather and I that we had to return to our dens and get some sleep.

And I had complied with the ThunderClan leader of course, but I certainly didn't have to like it.

So now, I was lying in the nursery with Swiftkit curled up beside me. He wasn't aware of what had happened at all, and that his kin was dead. I figured that my son was just a bit too young to understand what was going on, and anyways, I was too pained and overwhelmed with grief to be able to say a single word to him.

It wasn't until many heartbeats after I had settled down in the nursery that I finally felt myself beginning to drift off into sleep.

Maybe you'll wake up tomorrow and feel just a bit better, I told myself in my half-sleepiness.

Almost immediately as darkness took a hold of me, I realized that I could suddenly hear several whispers. I almost wanted to pull myself into consciousness once again to tell the other queens that they needed to be a little quieter. But it didn't take me long to figure out that these whispers were getting louder and louder as I feel deeper and deeper into sleep. Soon enough, they were coming from all sides of me, and I couldn't pick out just one place anymore.

What's happening?

When I then opened my eyes out of fear, I knew instantly that I wasn't in the nursery anymore. Actually, I was surrounded by many, *many* tall oak trees. They were so bright and radiant-looking that they almost seemed to be sparkling. A small stream quietly flowed near me, the sounds of the soft ripples calming me just a bit. And eventually, it was all that I could hear as the whispering around me suddenly faded.

I stood up and began to look around. I clearly wasn't in any place that actually existed. No place was this perfect.

Am I in StarClan? I wondered, looking at my surroundings in awe. *Why am I here?*

As I continued to scan my surroundings in disbelief and confusion, I then jumped in alarm as I noticed that another cat was beside me.

It was Jayfeather, glancing around and looking just as confused as I was.

"Jayfeather?" I blurted out as soon as I had noticed him.

Jayfeather jumped at my voice before turning to face me. "Goldenshine?" He exclaimed. I then tilted my head as the medicine cat peered past me. "Lilypetal? Thornclaw?"

I gasped, feeling a new mix of surprise and happiness. *Thornclaw and Lilypetal are here too?*

I turned around, following Jayfeather's gaze, to see Lilypetal and Thornclaw standing beside the stream.

I watched as both of my parents whipped their heads around at Jayfeather's call before padding up to join the two of us. I ran up to meet them, greeting them and touching my nose to theirs as if I hadn't seen them in a while.

As I pulled away from Thornclaw, I let my gaze flit from one parent to another. "What are you two doing here?"

Lilypetal exchanged a baffled glance with Thornclaw before shrugging, her hazel eyes wide. "I could ask you the same question!"

I admitted, shaking her head. I then watched as my mother padded up to Jayfeather. "You're a medicine cat - do *you* know what is going on?"

Jayfeather snorted, lashing his tail, letting his gaze fall on each of us. "I would think that I'm getting a message from StarClan, but *you all* are here."

I flicked my ears as the gray tabby tom spoke. *Great StarClan, I almost forgot that Jayfeather can see in his dreams!*

"Would could StarClan want with *us*?" Thornclaw wondered aloud.

Before any of us could attempt to answer my father's question, we were all suddenly blinded by a beautiful white light. I screwed my eyes shut against it, even using my tail as a shield.

But as soon as it had come, it disappeared, and it took a few moments for my eyes to adjust to my surroundings again.

What just happened?

I glanced over at everyone else around me to see that all of them, even Jayfeather, had a bewildered look on their face.

I stared at my parents and Jayfeather for a single heartbeat before deciding to follow their gazes.

And to be honest, when I looked at what was in front of me, I couldn't help but let out a cry mixed with happiness and more grief all over again.

It was Snowflight, like she had never looked before. I mean, she looked *perfect*; All of her scratches were gone, her fur was as pure white as it could possibly get, and her ice-blue eyes seemed to glow in the moonlight.

Lilypetal was the first one to speak. "Snowflight!" Lilypetal cried as she and Thornclaw ran up to meet their daughter.

Oh my StarClan, Snowflight is here!

I let out a squeal, following quickly behind them. Jayfeather just stood in the same place, his blue eyes wide with befuddlement.

"Snowflight, I'm so sorry!" I wailed to my sister once I got to her, digging my muzzle into her fur as Lilypetal and Thornclaw were doing. "I'm sorry that I couldn't save you."

I then backed up just a bit to meet her pale blue gaze. "I'm sorry that I was too late..."

Snowflight dipped her head, her eyes seeming to be filled with so much wisdom. "It was *not* your fault, Goldenshine," she insisted, rubbing her cheek against mine. "What you did was enough."

I couldn't suppress a whimper as I sensed Snowflight's immense gratitude. *I wonder if she was watching me the entire time? Did she see me avenge Ashfur for her? Oh, I hope so.*

I then let out a sigh filled with ease as the four of us, the full family - Me, Lilypetal, Thornclaw and Snowflight brushed our fur together, I heard Jayfeather sigh behind me. I pulled my head away from Snowflight to see the medicine cat slowly walking over to Snowflight.

Almost as if the spark emerging between Snowflight and Jayfeather was clear, Lilypetal and Thornclaw backed away from Snowflight as I had. I settled down just a tail-length away, watching as Snowflight stared at Jayfeather, her eyes filled with love and sorrow. Jayfeather stared right back at her, the mix of affection, love and shock, mainly, apparent in his blue eyes.

He fell in love with a cat that he couldn't even see, I realized. *Now that definitely says something, doesn't it?*

I then watched in fascination as Jayfeather sighed, his gaze managing to soften even more, before pressing his muzzle to Snowflight's. "Oh, Snowflight. You're so beautiful," he whispered before pulling away to meet her gaze. "I miss you so much already."

As I continued to watch this precious exchange, it took me a moment to notice that both Lilypetal's and Thornclaw's gazes were

burning into mind. I glanced over to my parents to find them looking utterly confused, concerned, and puzzled.

Understandably, I thought before returning my gaze to Snowflight and Jayfeather, a slight smirk on my face. *Just let them have their moment,* I then told my parents in my own mind.

Snowflight was speaking when my gaze fell back on her. "Goldenshine... killed Ashfur, and you tried to help her..." Snowflight meowed, hardly able to believe her own words.

Jayfeather then let his gaze fall to the ground. "This is when I would've have liked to know if you were in danger..." he muttered before looking up at my sister again.

Snowflight stared back at Jayfeather, her eyes filled with regret and sadness. "There was nothing that I could have done," she meowed in a voice just barely above a whisper, touching her muzzle to Jayfeather's cheek. She then let out a sigh, flanking Jayfeather as she turned to face Lilypetal, Thornclaw and I. "None of you all should feel any remorse for what happened to me. It was my time to go."

I glanced at Thornclaw as he shook his head, his eyes suddenly full of emotion. "How can you be sure of that?" He demanded, his voice cracking as he padded closer to his daughter. "I *refuse* to believe that, in fact."

All of us then fell silent for a few heartbeats, the sadness of Snowflight's death falling upon us once again. Yes, she was right there with us... but we knew that she was dead, and would only be here for the moment. As much as I hated to admit it, it almost made things harder. *I'm seeing her just to watch her disappear from my life all over again...*

Lilypetal broke the silence, padding up to join Thornclaw. "Snowflight, of course I am so glad to see you," my mother purred, licking Snowflight's cheek. "Is there a reason that you brought us all here?"

I finally trotted up to stand next to Lilypetal. "Well, it's just to say

goodbye, I assume," I answered. But when Snowflight didn't confirm, I shifted my gaze to look at my sister, my head tilted. "Well... right?"

Snowflight hesitated for a heartbeat. "Well... yes. That is part of it," she stammered. "But... I wanted to wish you all farewell before I..." She then cut herself off, her head falling to the ground as she tried to collect her thoughts.

We all stared at her intently.

"Before you what?" Jayfeather asked, his voice shaking with concern as he pressed his flank closer to hers.

We all watched as Snowflight then sighed, looking up at all of us with a knowing gaze in her blue eyes. "Before I..."

Suddenly, whispers were heard all around the forest once again, my ears shooting up as the noises began. *Oh, no. Not these hushed little creeps again...*

Snowflight flicked her ears as well and reluctantly began to back away from the four of us.

"I must go," she whispered, her blue eyes glowing with sorrow and grief.

Jayfeather's bright blue gaze saddened as he padded up to the white she-cat. "Do I have to lose you again?" He whispered.

Snowflight turned to him with deep love in her eyes. She sighed as she pressed her muzzle to his one last time. "You won't lose me forever," she meowed softly as she pulled away. "I'll be back, someday..."

All of our eyes widened with bemusement and confusion.

"Wait, what-?" I began to stammer, but I cut myself off as I realized that Snowflight nodding to all of us in farewell.

I couldn't help but gasp. She's leaving us already? I let out a wail, attempting to follow my sister, wherever she was going.

"Snowflight!"

"I love you all," Snowflight meowed softly as she backed off into the shadows.

"Snowflight, wait!" Jayfeather yowled.

But, the gray tabby tom never received a response as the spot where Snowflight had stood was suddenly empty. The four of us were left alone all over again, just as we had been when we arrived.

"She's... gone," Thornclaw choked out, staring at the place where his daughter had disappeared.

"Oh, Snowflight," Lilypetal whimpered, her eyes shut as she fought back emotion.

All I could do was sit in my place, my mouth hanging open. *What did she mean*, I wondered to myself, *when she said she would see us soon?*

But, before I could even think anymore, I gasped as everything around me began to blacken, each piece of my surroundings fading away in small positions. Out of the corner of my eye, Lilypetal, Thornclaw, and Jayfeather were beginning to vanish too.

I'm waking up.

Even the overall radiance and brightness of StarClan began to darken as well, and I could almost see myself back in the nursery again, Swiftkit at my belly still.

"Goodbye, Snowflight," I whispered as everything around me fully disappeared into black.

Chapter 22

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

I stared sadly out at the lake with my tired eyes, feeling almost as if I couldn't go on with a normal day after what had happened last night.

But now, I didn't know whether I was overwhelmed with grief or... *happiness* as I recalled what had happened last night. I had actually got to lay eyes on my daughter, even after her death. It had been absolutely wonderful, getting to see her looking so well, and breathing in her scent just one last time.

There had only been one part of all of it that left me utterly confused. *What did Snowflight mean?* I wondered as I thought about Snowflight's cryptic words that she had spoken just before she disappeared. *She'll be back someday?*

I shook my head quickly, trying not to overthink it and ruin the amazing experience that me, Thornclaw, Goldenshine, and Jayfeather had gotten to share. *She probably just meant she would visit us again in a dream. What else could she mean, after all? Nothing else would make much sense.*

I was still sitting there, deep in thought when I suddenly heard pawsteps behind me. I blinked out of my thoughts and turned to see Thornclaw approaching, looking almost as exhausted as I was.

"Hey, there," I purred as my mate padded up to sit beside me.

"Hey," he replied, wrapping his tail around his paws. "Have any good dreams last night?"

I rolled my eyes and gave Thornclaw a nudge. "That's not funny," I insisted, looking into his pale blue eyes. "That dream was *incredibly* special. How many cats are blessed to receive closure like that? Not

many, I'm sure!"

Thornclaw's smirk disappeared as he began to nod slowly. "I know," he responded, the humor in his eyes being replaced with awe. "I can't even believe it."

"Neither can I! The more that I think about it, the more confused that I become!" I admitted, managing to let out a small purr of amusement.

Thornclaw nodded in agreement. "Me too. You have no idea!" He meowed, his eyes wide. "Concepts like that are never fun, huh?"

I snorted, exchanging an amused look with the golden tabby. "No, definitely not!" I meowed back, shaking my head slowly as I stared out at the lake.

A couple of heartbeats after I had spoken, I felt Thornclaw shift himself closer to me. My stomach filled up with butterflies at his closeness, and I turned my head to meet Thornclaw's gaze. My heart melted as I was welcomed with a warm, affectionate gaze, something I hadn't seen in Thornclaw for a long time now.

"Lilypetal, listen," Thornclaw then meowed softly. "I feel like we haven't gotten a chance to talk."

I took a deep breath as I nodded. "I couldn't agree more," I murmured as I felt my tail droop behind me, my head lowering. "Thornclaw, I-"

"Okay, stop right there," Thornclaw insisted, and I tilted my head as he brushed his tail over my muzzle to silence me. "Lilypetal, you have absolutely nothing to apologize for."

"That is not true!" I retorted, taking a step closer to Thornclaw. "I mean... I didn't even give you a chance to explain. All I did was begin to make you feel badly..." I trailed off as a wave of guilt passed through me.

Thornclaw was shaking his head. "And you had every reason to," he meowed, touching his muzzle to my cheek. "I deserved everything that I got."

"But I called you a traitor!" I wailed as I recalled our first argument. "I said that I wasn't proud of you... oh, Thornclaw, please know that I am *always* proud of you."

"I know you are," Thornclaw whispered as he stared back at me, his eyes sparkling. "But I have one question..."

Uh, oh. I pricked my ears nervously. "Yes?"

"Why in the name of StarClan are you still acting like this is your fault?" Thornclaw asked. "When I've acted like a complete mouse-brain this entire time?"

I couldn't help but purr with amusement as the golden tabby then began to pace the area. "Every day since we first fought, I've wanted to throw myself off a ledge, thinking about how stupid I was. I mean, I wasn't even thinking straight," he began to ramble as he sat back down. "I was just so... disappointed."

"How so?" I asked my mate, padding over to him and wrapping my tail along his shoulders. "Disappointed that I didn't like what you were doing and got after you for it?"

Thornclaw lifted his head to meet my gaze, his eyes solemn. "Well... I knew that you wouldn't like it. I mean, that's why I was so scared to tell you," he admitted. "In all honesty, I was disappointed that *you* were disappointed in me."

I raised my eyebrows, realizing that the advice that Mistpelt had given me just yesterday was starting to connect with what Thornclaw was saying.

"It's just... Lilypetal, I value your opinions over any other cat's. And to hear that you were upset with me made me... question *everything*," he went on. "I mean, you were right, about all of it. Seeing you so upset only drove me to try to justify what I was doing, but obviously that's not possible, in my case. I just... it made me question if I even deserved you anymore. I thought that it would be better if-"

"-If you left," I continued for Thornclaw, quietly purring with

amusement as I licked his cheek.

I continued to purr as Thornclaw's eyes widened. "How did you know?"

I shrugged. "My mother gives really good advice," I murmured, winking at Thornclaw.

After Thornclaw and I let out *mrrows* of laughter, I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and then met my mate's gaze once again.

I knew that what I was about to say would probably be risky - it possibly would sway our relationship all over again - but I was going to stand my ground. "Look, Thornclaw," I began hesitantly, before hardening my meow. "... as much as I hate to be in a fight with you, none of this changes my opinion on what you're doing."

I braced myself for some pale-blue eyes full of hurt and anger, just as Thornclaw's had been when we stood in camp yelling at each other, but I was suprised to see them looking overwhelmed with distress. "I know," Thornclaw nearly whispered. He then closed his eyes and sighed. "I know."

"What's wrong?" I asked him as I wrapped my tail around his back. "I'm sorry. It may not be what you want to hear, but-"

"No, no. It's what I've *needed* to hear, but..." Thornclaw murmured, raising his head to meet my gaze. "The thing is... I *want* to leave. I wanted to leave as soon as I saw how upset you were with me."

"You did?" I asked, my heart warming just a bit at my mate's words.

"Of course I did," Thornclaw insisted, giving me a quick lick on the ear. "But... as much as I wanted to fix things, to get out of the Dark Forest, it's not possible." As my heart began to beat at twice the speed, I watched as Thornclaw's gaze was then overcome with shame. "It's one of the reasons why I found myself becoming so frustrated when we fought, and why I felt like I couldn't talk to you after. I couldn't fix what was straining our relationship... what made you so worried and upset... so I wondered if there was even a point."

"My goodness gracious, there was definitely a point," I meowed softly, running my tail down Thornclaw's flank. I then had to take a few moments to process Thornclaw's words. I even took one of them to pray to StarClan that they weren't true. "You... you think that you can't leave?" I then asked, my voice cracking.

Thornclaw pulled me closer to him with his tail. "I haven't known of any cat there that has been able to. Even if I tried, I can't even begin to imagine what I'd be risking." He then let out a long, deep sigh. "We've already seen what defying cold-hearted cats can do..."

"Unfortunately," I breathed as I tried to ruthlessly push down grief. I then met Thornclaw's gaze again, which reflected my own sorrow. "But what about you?"

"I'll be careful," Thornclaw demanded.

"Thornclaw-"

"Trust me," Thornclaw meowed, softening his voice. "Lilypetal, I'm not going to risk anyone hurting you, or Goldenshine... *anyone* if I have a choice. You're right - they surely have ill-intent, and I don't want to see what they're capable of if I tread on their paws."

As uncomfortable as this is for the both of us... Thornclaw is right. He is stuck, I realized with dismay. I sighed, held Thornclaw's head with my tail, and made sure he was looking right into my eyes. "Be very, very careful. I can't even imagine what I'd do if I lost you, too."

Thornclaw's eyes finally looked sure as they stared back into mine. "And you, too. That's why I have to do this," Thornclaw meowed softly. "I will."

I then leaned my head on my mate's shoulder, trying to let myself be comforted by his scent. "Do you think that he'll be there?"

"Who?" Thornclaw asked, lifting his head from where it had been resting on mine.

I finally managed to let out a small purr of amusement. "The cat that you were subtly implying to earlier," I murmured, giving Thornclaw a light nudge. *The cat whose eyes I want to gouge out...*

Thornclaw seemed to understand my explanation, as he snorted and unsheathed his claws into the ground. "He killed our daughter," he meowed tautly. "He'd better be."

"I second that," I murmured, practically feeling weak with sadness and anger for a heartbeat. "How are you even going to stand it?" I then asked, my voice unintentionally rising into a growl. "I wouldn't be able to see even a flash of his gray-speckled fur without wanting to burst into flames."

Thornclaw let out a huff and shook his head. Even from just the look on his face, I could tell that he was genuinely trying to come up with an answer to that question. "If there's anything I can help in this situation, it will be that I don't have to lay an eye on that fox-heart ever again."

"If Goldenshine hadn't already done the job herself, I would've shredded him into so many pieces that any evidence of his body would be impossible to find," I muttered through gritted teeth.

Thornclaw and I were then able to share a quiet moment of laughter, but it didn't last as another wave of sadness and regret rushed through me. "I... I hate that it took us losing our daughter for us to get our minds straight," I sighed.

To my surprise, Thornclaw rolled his eyes in response. "Don't be silly. Your mind has been sound this entire time," he insisted, shaking his head slowly. "This quarrel was all me. Great StarClan, I was so stupid."

"Oh, Thornclaw," I murmured, getting lost into his pale blue gaze. "You don't have to say that. I didn't make things much better."

"No, that's not true. You tried to approach me so many times, and I acted like a complete mouse-brain!" Thornclaw hissed, clearly upset with himself. "I-"

Before Thornclaw could say anything else, I let out a purr of amusement and put my tail over Thornclaw's mouth to stop him from speaking anymore. "Thornclaw, I understand. Mistpelt laid it all out for me!"

Thornclaw rolled his eyes. "Great StarClan," he breathed, a purr rumbling in his throat. My mate then took a deep breath, his eyes softening again as he looked into my eyes. "So... we're okay?"

"We're fantastic," I meowed to him softly. I touched my nose to his head briefly and then met his pale blue gaze again. "I love you so much."

Thornclaw didn't hesitate to answer me back. "I love you too, Lilypetal," he breathed. "Let's never fight like that again, for StarClan's sake!"

I let out a *mrrow* of laughter as I dug my muzzle into Thornclaw's chest and he licked my head. I closed my eyes and sighed as Thornclaw's scent flooded through my nose. *Our quarrel is finally resolved*, I thought with ease. *Thank StarClan.*

Before either of us could even say anything else, a yowl was heard from the direction of camp.

"All cats old enough to catch their own prey, please gather beneath the Highledge for a Clan meeting!"

Thornclaw and I exchanged a half-confused, half-surprised glance.

"That must be Firestar," Thornclaw realized out loud, his ears flicking as he began to run into the forest. "Let's go."

I trotted behind Thornclaw as he began to run back to camp, my tail straight up in the air as the scent of the forest flowed into my nostrils. Things were beginning to look up already; I had gotten to see Snowflight one last time, and now Thornclaw and I were officially reconciled.

By the time that the two of us arrived, almost every cat was already gathered just beneath the Highledge.

I padded over and sat by Goldenshine, who was sitting beside Mousewhisker. I couldn't suppress a smile as I noticed that they had been quietly joking and whispering together as I had approached them.

Hm... they seem happy together, I thought to myself fondly. *I wonder if they'll actually become mates someday?*

I turned my head away from the two younger cats as Firestar let out another screech to get his Clan's attention. I almost immediately gasped as I did this, shocked to see that Lionblaze and Dovepaw were standing up beside the ThunderClan leader on the ledge. *Is Firestar retiring, blowing off Brambleclaw, and making these two leader and deputy?* I thought jokingly as Firestar began to speak.

"As you all know," Firestar began, "the four Clans have agreed to each send two of their strongest cats to venture on a journey to see what is causing this terrible drought."

There were many murmurs and nods in agreement. I exchanged an anxious glance with my daughter. *It's so awful that it has to come to this*, I realized. *This drought has become so bad that we actually have to send cats away...*

Firestar continued. "I have decided to send out Lionblaze and Dovepaw to complete this journey. Yes, they are young, but I know I can trust them with this difficult task."

While Lionblaze stood full of courage and pride as Firestar spoke, Dovepaw seemed to be shaking so much that she would topple over the edge. So much so that I was tempted to run over a couple of times to break her fall, if needed.

As much as I trusted Firestar, I seriously wondered what his reasoning was for sending out a cat so young. *Lionblaze, her mentor, will protect her,* I tried to tell myself.

As I thought this, I looked back up to the Highledge to see that Firestar was dipping his head in dismissal. "Lionblaze and Dovepaw will be leaving tomorrow," he announced as he leapt down from the Highledge. "Wish them luck!"

As more murmurs and meows rose in the clearing, I turned to Goldenshine, who I had realized was speaking to me.

"Why in the name of StarClan would he choose her?" My daughter

meowed, seemingly half to herself as she shot quick glances at Dovepaw. "Why is she so special, I wonder?"

I lifted my tail over her mouth, realizing that the younger gray she-cat might be able to hear Goldenshine's words. "For StarClan's sake, Goldenshine, just be happy for her," I pointed out. "Do you really think Firestar would send her out if she was incapable? I'm sure there was a good reason." *I'm almost trying to tell myself that last part more than Goldenshine...*

Goldenshine nodded, but still rolled her eyes at my words. I couldn't help but purr as I watched this, because it was already clear that Goldenshine was returning to her old self again, after being so thrown off when falling for Breezepelt. She was turning back into the spunky, determined and headstrong young warrior that I had always known and loved.

As the small gathering died down, and the sun began to set, the cats of ThunderClan then began to disappear into their dens.

I took a glance up at the navy sky before walking into the warrior's den. Once I was inside, I almost immediately caught sight of Thornclaw lying in his nest, with a small empty spot beside him, to my relief. As of now, we hadn't shared a nest in many quarter moons, practically sleeping on opposite sides of the warriors den. I was so happy to be able to sleep beside him again, after so long.

I purred quietly as I approached my mate, looking lovingly down at him in the nest. His eyes were closed, but his quicker breathing told me that he was still awake.

As I nestled up beside Thornclaw, I continued to purr as I could feel his tail wrap itself around my back. Then he licked my head soothingly before letting his head settle on top of mine.

Soon after, my eyes began to close, and I drifted off into sleep.

~•~•~•~•~•~•~•~•~•~•~

My eyes suddenly shot open as I heard a loud commotion coming from outside of the warriors den. I stood up and stretched out,

feeling as if I had only slept for a couple of heartbeats. *It's almost as if I closed my eyes and opened them right back!*

I glanced around to see that Thornclaw was gone, along with most of the other cats in the den. Only Cloudtail, Berrynose, and Ferncloud were still curled up in their nests.

Continuing to hear the meows of many cats, I raced out of the den as I realized what was going on. This morning, Dovepaw and Lionblaze were to leave on their journey to find the water. I came out to find exactly what I had expected - I saw a big cluster of cats, all surrounding Lionblaze and Dovepaw.

I tried not to let a *mrrow* of laughter escape me as I saw Jayfeather standing behind the crowd, looking quite irritated as he held many bundles of herbs in his mouth.

"You mouse-brains! Get out of the way!" Jayfeather hissed, trying to peer over the crowd. "What does a cat need to do to get their work done?"

I then watched as after a few more heartbeats of Jayfeather trying to "shoo" everyone away, the ThunderClan warriors and apprentices finally began to clear, and the medicine cat was finally able to reach Dovepaw and Lionblaze. They began to whisper amongst themselves, and I couldn't hear what they were saying. I narrowed my eyes, wondering wha Jayfeather possibly could have to tell them. *Maybe herbs to look for on the way?* I guessed. But I was then thrown off all over again when Firestar emerged from his den and joined them.

A few more words were passed that I couldn't hear at all, and eventually Firestar backed away from the three cats and turned to the rest of the Clan.

"ThunderClan, wish these two brave cats luck on this journey," Firestar commanded to the Clan, looking admirably at Lionblaze and Dovepaw."

"May StarClan be with you all!"

I felt a rush of pride as the Clan cheered Lionblaze's and Dovepaw's names as the two left camp, holding their heads up high.

I took a deep breath as I watched them go. *I certainly second that!* I thought, thinking about Firestar's words. *StarClan, be with them, please! We need them safe, and we need water soon!*

Thornclaw came to sit beside me as I watched their tails disappear, gone for the last time for StarClan knows how long.

I sighed as my mate licked my ear in greeting. "Great StarClan, I sure hope that this works," I meowed to Thornclaw, venting out my worries. "What is going to happen to us if they can't find the water?"

Thornclaw snorted. "Well, then we're going to have us a bunch of dry-mouthed cats!"

"Thornclaw!" I exclaimed, nudging his shoulder lightly with my tail.

"I'm joking," Thornclaw whispered, briefly touching his muzzle to mine. "All we can do is trust them, right? It's out of our control. There's still that glimmer of hope, isn't there? StarClan will be watching over Lionblaze and Dovepaw, and they'll be watching over us."

I took a deep breath, letting myself be comforted by Thornclaw's words. "You're absolutely right," I meowed, looking lovingly back at the golden tabby. I then raised my eyebrows as Thornclaw sniffed, his eyes glowing with humor. "What?"

Thornclaw nudged me lightly on the shoulder. "Those were your words, my love. Not mine!" He purred.

"Great StarClan, you're right!" I exclaimed as I recalled my own words. *Wow, I sure gave Thornclaw some pretty dang good advice that night that we saved Goldenshine and Hollyleaf from the tunnels, didn't I?* I joked to myself as I gave Thornclaw a teasing look. "And you very well should be living by them - my word is *holy*!"

Thornclaw *mrrowed* with laughter as he licked my cheek. "Oh, I know it is," he purred before beginning to trot over to the fresh-kill pile, beckoning me to follow. "Now, how about we eat our worries

away with a bit of fresh-kill?"

"Oh, bite your tongue!" I purred as I managed to follow my mate happily over to the fresh-kill pile.

Chapter 23

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

It had now been a moon since Lionblaze and Dovepaw had left for their journey. It had seemed that they had left *seasons* ago, and things in the Clans unfortunately were representing that. To say the least, the cats of ThunderClan weren't doing so well. Many of the warriors were cranky (including myself), the elders and kits were becoming weaker, and the prey was practically disappearing because there was no water for them to drink.

I was drowning in these negative thoughts in the nursery as I sat there silently. I could just barely hear the other queens whispering and gossiping to each other at the other side of the den. Their dehydration was already obvious enough, but hearing their hoarse voices made it seem much worse.

I shook my head slowly, let out a weak sigh and then looked down to where my son, Swiftkit, was taking a nap. I couldn't help but smile as I stared lovingly down at the little gray-black bundle. I knew already that someday, he was going to grow up, become an apprentice and then become a warrior, but there were so many times that I wished that he could just stay right here, curled up in my belly for the rest of my life.

I found that that thought was reoccurring more and more as he began to noticeably grow. And soon after he was born, he had already began to develop a personality. Fortunately and unfortunately, one of the first things I had noticed was that Swiftkit reminded me a lot of Breezepelt. He was a very sweet cat - considerate, thoughtful, and very intelligent, but his quickness of temper was quite apparent. To my dismay, he was sometimes very impatient with Cherrykit and Molekit, his very new denmates.

"Hey, Swiftkit?" a squeaky voice meowed kindly, interrupting my thoughts.

I glanced over, following the voice, and saw that it had been Cherrykit that had spoken, her head tilted and her tail lashing back and forth excitedly.

"What?" Swiftkit asked sharply, clearly angry that Cherrykit had interrupted his sleep. I sighed, trying to sooth my son by running my tail along his smaller flank.

Cherrykit seemed taken aback for just a moment, but then she shook her head quickly and began hopping around. "I was just wondering if you wanted to come outside and play?" she asked, then running up to stand in front of our nest. "C'mon, please?"

As angry as Swiftkit seemed to be at Cherrykit initially, I was surprised to watch my son look up at me as if to ask for permission.

I smiled, pleased that Swiftkit wasn't letting his crankiness close him off from his friends. I let out a small purr and pushed him softly forward with my tail. "Go ahead, and have fun!" I said to my little tom gently. "And be nice, for StarClan's sake!"

Swiftkit gave me one last warm glance before running off with Cherrykit and Molekit out into the camp clearing.

I watched them for a few moments, making sure that they were going to play safely, I stood up. *With Swiftkit busy, I might as well go out and take a walk,* I thought to myself. *As much as I love being with my son, I would enjoy getting some time to myself!*

So, with this in mind, I took a stretch and left the nursery. I gave nods of greeting to every cat I passed - some sharing tongues, some assembling for patrols, and some simply sharing a quick meal - and then finally crawled through the gorse tunnel and out of camp.

I slowly walked through the forest and took in the greenleaf weather and my surroundings. *As thirsty as I am with this drought, the greenleaf air is still very nice. It's almost a shame that I have to stay inside in the nursery when the forest looks like this!*

For a while, I somewhat just wandered aimlessly around the forest, taking in all of the grassy and leafy scents, and enjoying feeling my

paws brush against soft grass with every step I took. But before I knew it, the lake came into my view.

Or, at least what was left of it.

I glanced around sadly, trying to look for even just puddles.

Nothing.

I sighed, sitting down as I realized this. *Well, I suppose a flood wouldn't be much fun either, would it?* I thought, trying to make myself feel better somehow. *It's pretty sad that that's what I'm having to say in order to stay optimistic at this point.*

I continued to stay where I was, sitting there in silence for many heartbeats before I suddenly heard a voice behind me.

"Hey, Goldenshine."

I flicked my ears and turned around to see that Jayfeather padding up to sit beside me.

"How did you know it was me?" I asked the medicine cat, knowing very well that he was blind.

Jayfeather shot me a glare. "I may not be able to see, but I have a nose, mousebrain," he snapped.

I rolled my eyes and looked back out to the lake. "So did you need something?" I asked him, a hint of annoyance in my voice because of his short temper.

If Swiftkit's going to be like this, I better get used to it! I realized.

I turned back to look at Jayfeather as he answered my question. "I just needed time away from all of those complaining kits," he muttered, lashing his gray tabby tail.

I stared at him in confusion. "There's only three kits in the Clan, and you barely spend time around any of them!" I pointed out before shrugging. "Which I suppose is the way that it should be."

Jayfeather snorted, nodding in the direction of camp. "I'm talking about everyone else!" he exclaimed.

I let out a small *mrrow* of laughter. "Great StarClan..." I breathed, nudging Jayfeather on his shoulder before glancing at the lake once again. "Maybe once the lake comes back, you can throw everyone in it, and see if they ever complain to you again!"

"And I just might," Jayfeather muttered before beginning to twitch his tail irritably. "Dovepaw and Lionblaze had better figure this out."

I sniffed. "Shouldn't you just be hoping that they're safe?" I asked, tilting my head at the medicine cat.

"Oh, I know that they're safe," Jayfeather murmured. I narrowed my eyes in confusion, wondering how he could possibly know that. But, before I could question him at all, I held back, knowing that questioning Jayfeather was never a smart decision.

Over the past moon, I had been amazed to see how quickly Jayfeather had seemed to return back to his old cranky, grouchy self. Up until y sister had passed away and a bit after that, I had gotten to see so much vulnerability in Jayfeather that I'm sure not even Lionblaze, his brother, got to see too often. Snowflight had brought out such a different, softer side of the usually short-tempered medicine cat.

I then couldn't suppress a shaky sigh as I thought of my sister. *Great StarClan, it's been a moon, but sometimes it still feels as fresh as when I first found her,* I thought grimly before glancing over at Jayfeather, who was staring out at the lake. *He probably misses Snowflight just as much as I do...*

I was surprised to see that Jayfeather and I were thinking about the same thing, from what he said next. "I can't believe Snowflight's been gone for an entire moon," Jayfeather meowed, a shiver running down his spine.

Great StarClan, you had to bring that up out loud? I thought to myself angrily. *I acknowledge Snowflight's death and the duration since then in*

my mind every few moments already!

Despite feeling reluctant to talk about my sister with Jayfeather, I took a deep breath and decided to power through. "Yeah, I know. Although, it sure feels like it's been more than a moon," I responded to him, trying to calm myself down and not let grief overcome me again.

When Jayfeather didn't say another word, I turned to look at him, and saw immense pain overwhelming his blind blue eyes.

I sighed and stood up, padding up closer to the gray tabby tom. "You know," I began, sitting down again. "She did love you, a lot. She told me about it." I then managed to purr with amusement as I remembered how panicked Snowflight had seemed about her feelings. "When she left your den that morning, saying she was going to talk to me... well, it was *all* about that."

"I figured," Jayfeather murmured, his blind eyes deep as he seemed to fall into memories. "Great StarClan, I don't know what came over me. I had never felt this way about anyone before."

"You sure did a good job of hiding it!" I couldn't help but tease. "If I had found out you had feelings for my sister earlier, you would've gotten a stern talking to, and *not* just because medicine cats can't fall in love!"

Jayfeather rolled his eyes. "Well, I would have hidden it my entire life if I had to, if not for-"

I flicked my ears and narrowed my eyes, wondering why Jayfeather had cut himself off.

"If not for what?" I pressed, my gaze burning into the medicine cat's even though I knew that he wouldn't be able to see.

Luckily for Jayfeather, I'm sure, any answer that he would have had to give was interrupted as the most strange sound I had ever heard began to rise up in the distance. It was some sort of rumble... almost like thunder.

"What is that?" I asked Jayfeather. "Wha-"

Jayfeather shushed me before I could ask another question, raising his tail in the air.

The sound was getting louder and louder the more heartbeats that went by. I stood up and began to pad closer to the lake, for some reason thinking that I would discover something if I did so. And sure enough, as the sound got even louder, I realized that it sounded like... *water. It sounds like the way that the water flows in the river!*

"Is that...?" I breathed, trailing off as I continued to prick my ears. *It couldn't be...*

All of the sudden, up ahead, my mouth dropped as a large wave burst into the river up ahead, in RiverClan territory. Immediately after that, the water from the river began to flow into the lake, filling it back up completely.

"No way!" Jayfeather exclaimed.

"They did it!" I squealed, hopping around excitedly. "We have to tell everyone immediately!"

I then pelted past the gray tabby tom to head back to camp. *ThunderClan isn't going to suffer from this drought another day!*

I skidded to a halt as I burst through the gorse tunnel, Jayfeather appearing behind me a few heartbeats later. "Everyone!" I yowled out into the clearing. "The water is back!"

Chapter 24

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

The Clans had greatly thrived since Dovepaw and Lionblaze had retrieved the water to the lake.

Everyone was going to give up hope! I realized to myself, recalling the unison of misery that spread among the Clan as we had awaited the two young cats' return. But after the water had burst back into the lake from the river, Lionblaze and Dovepaw had returned about a full day later, their heads held high as they walked back into their camp.

Everything had already seemed to become brighter. The cats of ThunderClan, well, *all* of the Clans in fact, were becoming stronger already. Because cats were no longer thirsty, they were beginning to gain their strength again. *And as an amazing bonus, the prey is back too!*

Now, it was the moonhigh after the miracle, and the cats of ThunderClan were heading to the gathering to discuss the drought situation, or rather, the *end of the drought* situation. The cats of ThunderClan had all exited camp as we beamed with pride, ready to conquer any future issues that came our way.

We could see the other Clans traveling in the distance, looking as happy as we were. The lake looked as plentiful as it had ever been.

The full moon was high in the sky, and ThunderClan was the first to arrive to the gathering island. I excitedly walked across the old tree with Thornclaw just behind me.

"It is wild how quickly things have improved," Thornclaw had said to me as we walked across the log. "It just seems like the cats were arguing, and struggling to live, and now everyone's... *happy*!"

I nodded back to my mate in agreement. "It's a miracle if I'd ever seen one!" I purred, not being able to hold back an incredibly satisfied smile.

Thornclaw padded up to flank me, his pale blue eyes gleaming with humor. "Well, *sure*," he purred back, nudging my shoulder with his. "What type of miracles did you experience back when you were a kittypet? Your Twoleg letting you outside for just a *little* longer?"

I let out an exaggerated gasp, pretending to be offended as I nudged Thornclaw back. "Great StarClan, you're such a bully!" I exclaimed. I then thought for a moment, and then shrugged. "But honestly, you're not wrong." *If not that, it was either getting a little less food in my food bowl, or getting less than ten shots at the vet...*

I then looked warmly at Thornclaw as he howled with laughter, and a purr rumbled in my throat as he dug his muzzle into my neck fur. *I'm so happy that we're together again...* I thought, licking Thornclaw's head. *It was even just little moments like this that made me miss this little furball so much.*

Thornclaw and I then leaped off of the log and onto the island, side by side.

Then, the cats of ThunderClan began to disperse around the island, and approaching the other Clans as they arrived just behind us.

I had just called a farewell to Tawnypelt of ShadowClan, and I decided that I was going to start finding my way back to ThunderClan, figuring that the Gathering would start at any moment.

I then stopped in my tracks when out of the corner of my eye, I could see Goldenshine standing in a small clearing just a few fox-lengths ahead. She was whipping her head around in many directions, her eyes focused, as if she was looking for someone.

I narrowed my eyes, the mystery of who she might be talking to not being much of a head-scratcher. *Breezepelt.*

I sighed, not wanting my daughter to fall into the same trap all over

again. I knew that now her loyalties were fully on ThunderClan once again, she had already seemed so much like her old self again, and I didn't want to watch it deteriorate all over again. As I was about to pad up to my daughter, a loud yowl came from the large oak, and I looked up to see that all four leaders were on their tree branches.

The Gathering was beginning.

I took one glance over at Goldenshine as I settled down beside Cinderheart and Poppyfrost, praying to StarClan that Goldenshine would have enough common sense by now to not go through with what she had been about to do.

Once the cats on the island fell silence, Firestar spoke first. He gave recognition to Lionblaze and Dovewing, and then he was finished.

Leopardstar spoke next, and she mourned the loss of Rippletail. After a few moments of silence, grief rippling among all four Clans, Blackstar recognized Tigerheart and Toadfoot, and Onestar recognized Whitetail and Sedgewhisker - the cats from their Clans that had gone on the journey to find what had caused the Long Dry.

Once the Gathering ended, I knew immediately that I was going to find Goldenshine. I scanned the clearing, knowing that her golden tabby pelt would not be difficult to find. And sure enough, she was close, and *not* talking to Breezepelt to my relief.

I sighed as I trotted up to approach my daughter. "Hey," I meowed to her, my eyes narrowing as I licked her head. "What's going on up there?"

I pulled away to meet Goldenshine's dark-gray gaze, her eyes filled with a mix of humor and solemness. She already seemed to know what I was thinking. "Nothing but sense," she purred, tapping on her own head with my tail. "And no, mother, I didn't talk to Breezepelt, nor was I going to."

"Really?" I questioned my daughter, tilting my head. "You know, it's okay if you did. I just... I don't want to lose my daughter again."

I then watched as Goldenshine sighed, touching her nose to mine. "Don't you fret!" She purred. "Your daughter is back and better than ever!"

I then shut my eyes, becoming overwhelmed with happiness at Goldenshine's words. *She already seems to have that spirit back that she had as an apprentice...*

"Well, except now, she has a son!" Goldenshine added, her eyes glowing with love as the two of us padded side by side across the fallen tree.

"And a very handsome little kit at that!" I purred as I thought about Goldenshine's son, Swiftkit. "How is he doing?"

"Oh, he's wonderful," Goldenshine purred back. "I didn't think that it was possible to love something so much..."

I let out a purr of amusement, licking Goldenshine's cheek. "I thought that exact same thing once you and Snowflight came along."

Goldenshine let out a shaky sigh as we finally arrived at the gorse tunnel that led into ThunderClan's camp. "Great StarClan, I miss her."

"I do too."

Goldenshine and I exchanged a sorrowful glance as we emerged back into camp, Snowflight I'm sure full in both of our minds.

But, as my eyes fell on a strange shape near the Highledge, sad thoughts of my daughter actually managed to flit away for a bit.

"Smudge!" Firestar exclaimed.

A/N

Hey, guys! That was the end! I can't believe it is finally complete!

But don't worry, the series isn't over yet!

I have already started the fourth book: Darkness Awakens, and I just posted the prologue! Feel free to check it out!

Sorry to end on a cliffhanger, but I love doing that!!!

I hope you guys enjoyed this book, because I certainly enjoyed writing it! Expect another book in the later months!

~ may StarClan light your path ~

- warriorcatlover345

New Book!

Hey, guys! I know this book is complete, but I thought that this would be a good place to let you know that I have started the fourth book to this series! It is called Darkness Awakens. I just have the prologue up right now, but hopefully you guys will want to check it out! I am very excited to start this book!

~ may StarClan light your path ~

- warriorcatlover345